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Editors' Introduction to LUCAYOS

It is with great pleasure that the editors welcome you to Lucayos, a biennial peer reviewed journal of literature, culture and the arts, produced by the School of English Studies, College of The Bahamas. “Luyacos” is the name of both the original peoples of The Bahamas and the islands themselves, indicating a harmonious coexistence of cultural and natural environments, the link of the mental and physical worlds. As editors, we hope to preserve the concord inherent in the connecting of creative and artistic expressions of cultural and social life that the name “Lucayos” suggests while at the same time inculcating a critical regional cultural awareness.

Lucayos is intended to be a forum for academic exchange and scholarship, intellectual debate, informed dialogue, critical thought, and creative expressions of the liberal and fine arts.

This first issue celebrates The College of The Bahamas’ hosting for the first time the West Indian Literature Conference, and it comprises articles originally given as presentations and papers at the 26th West Indian Literature Conference, March 08-10 2007. Participants representing various Caribbean nations and islands, Great Britain and the United States gathered to discuss the theme of “Horizons”, a symbol of imagination, aspiration and freedom, as envisaged by scholars and creative writers. In the words of COB’s President, Janyne Hodder, the theme of “Horizons” challenged the conference “to see a world of possibilities and promise, suggesting that perceived borders do not limit the field of our endeavours”.

The alternative visions and innovative possibilities addressed by the conference included the themes of: journeying, displacements and disjunctions, memory and trauma, national poetics and politics, and diverse representations of Caribbean identities. The papers published here represent a cross-section of the topics.

Future editions of Lucayos will highlight works by and discussion of Bahamian and Caribbean writers and artists. They will also incorporate contributions from the larger west-Atlantic intellectual community. They will therefore maintain an appreciation of local, regional and world culture. Contributions to future editions may be sent at any time to the editors.

The College of The Bahamas—as evidenced by this publication—is increasingly involved in scholarly work and research as it moves rapidly towards university status. We expect, therefore, that the next issue of this journal will be a University of The Bahamas production.

Marjorie Brooks-Jones
Daphne M. Grace
Ian G. Strachan
March 2008
The leaping Caribs whiten,
in one flash, the instant
The race leapt at Sauteurs,
A cataract! One scream of bounding lace
(Derek Walcott, Collected Poems, 213)

According to Gordon Rohlehr in his gloss of what follows next, this scream precedes the poetic act of burying the dead as an act of exorcism, and Walcott uses the mattock for this purpose:

The mattock, his tool of choice, is more normally used to loosen the soil for a digging, or to unearth tough roots and stones. But such loosening of the soil might release into imagined memory rather than bury, the duppies of history whose potential for good or evil has always frightened Walcott, who therefore strives violently to obey those instincts engrained in him by a “sound colonial education,” and suppress memories embedded in the landscape of Columbus’s Archipelago of seven hundred islands (Rohlehr 8-9).

Walcott is here in “confessional mode” because he is involved in a mental and spiritual “journeying similar to what occurs in confessional fiction... where the mature, unillusioned narrator revisits areas of shame, guilt, inadequacy, naïve innocence and non-heroic failure, in a quest for the sources of current trauma, loss of will, paralysis and unfulfilment” (Rohlehr 7). This seems as good a place to start as any, given that this paper is a response to Rohlehr’s statement that the silent scream, so evident throughout Caribbean literature, has remained virtually unexplored. It is nonetheless necessary to rehearse something of the trauma of origins and to say that there are at least two ways of viewing this trauma: one can address a dislocated or abusive past by
Lucayos

seeking to bury it, or one can seek to bring it into the present under a new aegis or way of seeing. The burial of the dead in memory runs the permanent risk of that by now well documented phenomenon, “the return of the repressed”, in that the past, forced to go underground, returns masked and in different forms and permanently crucified on the cross of denial.

This may be the genesis of Wilson Harris’s Carnival Trilogy, in particular in the figures of Ross, Penelope and Simon. Simon is “epic lover” and “epic soldier” (Harris Four Banks 53) and in the text, The Four Banks of the River Space, he is a ghostly presence that is bodied forth and as the materialized figure of an abuser has even the capacity to do bodily harm. In this sense Harris’s figures become concrete realizations of psychological abuse, as this abuse remains lodged in the psyche of the victim.

Harris goes beyond such fixities, since for him art represents the possibility of calling forth the ghosts or spectres that dwell in the landscape of the Caribbean, in fables and historic narratives, and in repetitive patterns that live on in the individual. Such ghostly presences become bodied because the artist as seer and healer calls them into being. As a writer who moves beyond the seeing eye of the world, as early as Palace of the Peacock (1960) he is equally concerned with art as a translation of intense passion and as a mechanism for creating gateways through which the experiences (the intersecting and interconnecting ghosts) that dwell in the communal psyche within the mythic spaces of Caribbean reality, can come to inhabit the fecund mind and imagination of the writer/artist. Art, therefore, actively functions as a process of healing or “at-one-ment” (54). The vehicle for such healing is to be found in the dual properties of art and myth and in the artistic capacity to spatialise the several layers of past, present and future, thus making time and space amenable to recreative agencies.

Harris, in the pages of what is for me the most important little book in West Indian Literature, Tradition, The Writer and Society (1967), demands from art the ability or capacity to heal through a process of articulation that will give voice to those who are inarticulate and are legislated for in mass and for him this requires an “architectural” response (8). What does the problem of trauma and its repression have to do with the question of architecture? The lines quoted by Rohlehr provide an example of both the repression of trauma and the artistic forms that move the reader beyond such stasis.

These lines (beginning with “The leaping Caribs whiten”) capture the movement of figures in space in a flash of light, aptly described by Rohlehr as that of a flash bulb or camera. The whitening is linked to the foam of the sea, the white of death and the white of light, as well as
the whitening that occurs when one has a cataract in the eye. There is wisdom and plenitude, ecstasy and longing, (in the idea of a leap and a flash which is the flash of art and of illumination).

The word “cataract” here is similar in Walcott’s usage to the word “chimera” in Omeros (282) in that both signify a measure of art, or the origins of art, and a wound and blot on vision so that there is an immediate contradiction set up. In fact there is a series of contradictions somewhat akin to Walcott’s other famous opposition, a “crystal of ambiguities” of Another Life (58). A cataract in the eye causes a failure of vision; yet the leap is a leap into light! That is, a way of seeing. By the placing of the word “cataract” in close proximity to the word “scream”, Walcott is also setting up a relationship between seeing and hearing. The scream becomes a product of, or akin to blindness. This is made more explicit in the verse stanza of a much later poem “Cul-desac Valley” from Arkansas Testament (1987) where, in considering the idea of beauty, Walcott creates a linear movement from poor self image to the blinding that has led to such impoverishment of being. The girl in the poem lacks an idea of her own beauty. Her beauty is progressively linked to the beauty of the natural landscape (an idea already well established in the earlier poetry), but here further associated with a burial of the self caused by a flash of writing:

as surf in the branches
increases like the shoal
of blue –and-white benches
in the government school,
reciting this language
that, on a blackboard,
blinds her like a page
of glare on the road,
so she ambles towards
an inner silence along
a red track the forest
swallows like a tongue” (12)

The swallowing of the tongue evokes the idea of an epileptic fit or an interior movement that sends shock waves and causes brain damage and loss of motor control. This is connected here with that act of blinding precipitated by an education system that blinds perception and imagination. This has close links to the negatives when “everything whitens” (9) because the poet’s youthful mind has rewritten the drama of St. Lucian eccentrics using the script of western mythologies. Here too in 1973, in Arkansas Testament, there is a flashbulb, which shows “their deaths” as these characters become “poor negatives” (9). What is
different in “Cul-de-Sac Valley” is the closer connection being formed with the kinds of theory that Kamau Brathwaite has been writing and which is being filtered through Walcott’s work, despite his criticisms of Brathwaite’s Africentricism. In all, what is evoked in the swallowed tongue and the blinding flash is a profound image of Brathwaite’s much explored idea of the “self-in-maroonage”.

The inner silence that Walcott graphs in the lines of “Cul-de-Sac Valley” is also connected to body movement in the word “ambling”. He is also making linear shapes on the page, and making the feet connect with soil by the very patterns that these feet make on the ground, as Rohlehr has pointed out. So that while the aruacs pounded their feet in their dance of death or ghost dance that is both ecstasy and annihilation, the girl in these stanzas moves like a West Indian, ambling towards the dark depths of her being, hiding herself in her forgetfulness of self as she climbs “straight/ up the steps of this verse” (*Arkansas* 40).

John Thieme observes that “Cul-de-Sac Valley” also foregrounds the process of attempting mimetic representation of the external world in other self-referential ways: people, creatures, and natural phenomena such as the sunrise “enter” (*Arkansas* 10), the stanzas of the poem suggesting as he puts it “the extent to which the supposedly discrete areas of poem and observed world are interacting with one another” (176). This is a point worth noting and as a poetic method of creating intersecting planes of art and nature as well as past and present, personal and national areas of experience and concern, this technique becomes much more pronounced in the later works.

The rationale for such an interconnection between natural world, history, art and psychic self is being worked out in a most lucid way in *Arkansas Testament*. This 1987 collection is very much about language and commitment and in particular about the enveloping rage that Walcott feels with far greater intensity in the Southern American States than he does elsewhere, because of the uncanny pricking of his skin as he recognises the physical and psychological impact of being black in the Southern States of America. In the poem that closes the collection and which gives the title to the book, he huddles against the wall at one with all the other bubbling black zeros in the racist south. The association Walcott here creates between nature, the language of poetry and this testament to himself as a black poet is mediated through the accumulated sounds and shapes around which diverse meanings cluster and cohere.

This identification begins in *Arkansas* with a systematic association of black vowels and consonants of those seen as illiterate and whose lives are lived in an “illiterate soil”. Illiteracy is the source of silence. Just as economic and psychological suffering are the causes of silence.
Silence is explored in its many manifestations in *Arkansas Testament*. There is the silence of the repressed self as has already been seen. There is the silence caused by unbelief (disbelief), a residual theme from earlier works but given deeper inflection in the poem’s attack on Western ways of seeing or monodic systems of thought when these can only gloss the stories of the Caribbean as bastardized rewritings of Western ideas. This is evident in the ironic turns of “White Magic”. The belief systems of the Caribbean are part of the asymmetry that the first poem of *Arkansas Testament* seeks to render in form, pattern and language. This question of form and language is addressed at the very beginning of *Arkansas Testament*, in that “Cul-de-Sac Valley” is about the asymmetrical nature of West Indian architecture and for this poet provides a model form for the creation of a poem:

A panel of sunrise  
on a hillside shop  
gave these stanzas  
their stilted shape (*Arkansas* 9).

In a word, in *Arkansas Testament*, the asymmetrical forms of language, including the forms of myth and folklore, combine with architectural constructions. This combination provides a tangible and concrete statement and a verification of the suffering and lived existence of a people. They do so because together they enable a mimetic patterning which is one of the primary vehicles through which the residues of hurt and exclusion become immanent in the text of the poems.

But the identification of the asymmetrical as visual and sonic patterns for the poetry of St Lucian lives in the sequences entitled “Here” is made to accrue even greater value as the work *Arkansas Testament* in its entirety progresses. The asymmetrical pattern is placed in opposition to the sterility of symmetry that in the second section of *Arkansas Testament*, “Elsewhere”, Walcott identifies with the Southern states of America where

a neat, evangelical town  
now pointed through decorous oaks  
its calendar comfort-scary  
with its simple, God fearing folks.  
Evil was as ordinary  
here as good. I kept my word. (*Arkansas* 112)

This juxtaposition of order versus what we may call disorder, leads the reader to an understanding of the nature of different perceptions. Many of these perceptions move from the realm of the visual to the dimension of the intuitive or visceral.
The ordinariness of the white Anglo Saxon whose blandness hides a godliness that is in fact destructive, opposes in retrospect the ordinariness of those from the Caribbean who live at the edges of doubt and disbelief as in “White Magic”. The belief systems of the Caribbean are given new legitimacy. What might have been viewed as mere “translations” of a hegemonic culture become, by extension, one might say by default, the repositories of a more genuine belief bathed in a true light of the world. Here we find Walcott differing from both Wilson Harris and Homi Bhabha in his interpretation of the word “translation.” For Bhabha the act of translation occurs in the changeover from a former culture to a place or space of syncretisation of cultures (1-18). His use of the word in the statement that “The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with ‘newness’ that is not part of the continuum of past and present” (7) is I think fundamentally different in conception to Walcott’s usage. The word “translation” for Walcott in “White Magic” and in other instances (see The Antilles) retains the negative idea of a hegemonic culture and the authority of that culture as a form of master template. For Walcott the concept of the new must paradoxically carry the shape of the wound or sore, in that it must retain a sense of continuity, while still performing an act of cultural newness. In this way Walcott can access the images of the New World to provide potent mechanisms for giving voice to the hurt of history. Equally, these images reflect his vision of the freshness and creativity of this new world.

Walcott has in the early sections of “Cul-de-Sac Valley” therefore made profound connections between landscape and soulscape and has set up a burgeoning series of interconnections that leads to an acceptance of levels of perception. By this and other mechanisms he sets in play systems of echoes that begin to circulate around the poems within the collection, until we arrive at the point where Walcott’s own rage and buried recognition of his own blackness, causes a psychic split.

This manipulation of echoes and the realities that issue from them, become extraordinarily potent in reference to Arkansas the place. He testifies that he is “A cipher in its bubbling black zeros, here” (110). This carries within it the self-recognition of the illiterate St Lucian. These echoes have accumulated over the course of the book and go beyond this text to many other Walcottian texts before it, in particular in their contradictory voices. They now find release on the page in this testimony to his blackness. As echoes and testament they do more than simply indicate self-recognition.

His words have the force of one bequeathing this moment to his readers, in particular since the poem opens with death. The word “here” in the line quoted is not only an echo in that it echoes the “here” of the first part of Arkansas Testament, but it is also a mark on the page that
signals writing as a palpable vehicle for making the black both invisible and nothing; but at the same time it asserts that writing is a concrete method of making a powerful counterstatement that remains as willed testament on the page.

The connections are very clear, and have emerged from the associations and linkages that the various sounds and images have been forging throughout the course of the work, in particular the network of sounds that makes light, blindness and writing analogous. The patterning of the text and its careful garnering of earlier works fashion the very system of associations that will make the act of writing appear to be a legacy from a poet as guide and shaper. Equally, this system is recognition of a particular way of seeing and thinking that has informed who and what he is and the place from which he has emerged. As Walcott dismantles systems of images or ways of seeing, he is also instituting new symbols that can act on the imagination of the Caribbean. These come from “here” and not “elsewhere”.

A good example of this process is to be found in the way that the light “that blinds” is taken up later in the poem and subsumes within itself the annihilating neon lights of the last pages of Arkansas Testament. These neon lights and their associated ideas also reference the cinematic imagery of The Fortunate Traveler. In this latter work cinema becomes the mechanism, as in parts of Wilson Harris, in particular The Tree of the Sun, for making the Caribbean person a spectral presence or a mere shadow. But Arkansas Testament is already in its final pages seeing the cinematic or televisual as an opening of experience and already anticipating the symbolic dimension that it achieves in Omeros.2

By the time that we arrive at the dawning of Omeros the shapeliness of the O is made to carry the weight of this symbolic meaning. The O has accumulated the accretions and echoes of Arkansas Testament and has become the wide opening of a mouth that is representative of Greek myth, and equally the O of dawn as well as the O of awe and the opening, as opposed to the closing, of civilization. In this sense it traces, in a form of rewinding, the cry that has begun to be uttered and to be heard as a “dog hears” in “The Star Apple Kingdom,” where a silent scream earlier emerged from the excised figures of the photograph of the great house and from the deep buildup of inequity; this is later released in a linear movement across the centuries and made concrete in the force field of the woman of revolution. This lack of equity achieves a kind of balance and the possibility of breaking open the hard shell of injustice in the space of Manley’s morning (383-395).

The pitched shriek of silence thus unites those who suffer pain and those who have the will and in Walcott’s view, the balance, to en-
able change. The cry unites those who utter and those who hear. In *Omeros* this responsiveness and these utterances are shaped in the audio-visual movement of the poem. This audio-visuality allows for the circular movement within the time of the poem’s progression.

The poem *Omeros* uses a conflict of parallel worlds that allows the reader to see and hear resemblances or echoes but also allows the discovery of differences. Words that appear the same tell different stories about the same event. In a sense Walcott is saying that trauma is remembered in differing ways—including partial forgetfulness. The architectural mimicry of the very shape of the hurt provides the artist with a vehicle for showing the various perspectives of experience and pain and the potential for healing.

It is perhaps significant that Kamau Brathwaite also takes up this question of architecture—that is the construction of shapes in space that both Harris and Walcott accomplish. Already in *Dream Stories* (1994) one senses that the beginnings of what Brathwaite calls sycorax text format, the white witch of computer lettering, is displacing the simple historic reverberations of language and sound to become not just a new form of textual inscription but to become a cell of meaning or a force field of sound and image through hieroglyphs shaped by computer graphics and the concise concretisation of word on the page.

Words or indeed letters scream at the reader in *Dream Stories*. They scream even louder in *The Zea Mexican Diary* (1995). Sandra Pouchet Paquet in the foreword to this work notes that “*The Zea Mexican Diary* makes public a different side of Kamau Brathwaite from collective vision to private vision” (ix). We are told by Sandra Pouchet Paquet that the text “coheres in its multifarious parts thematically and architecturally. In its formal aspects, the ritual of grief and lamentation is sculpted on the page with great meticulousness. Lines and Fonts are varied to achieve rhythmic effects, to mirror emotionally states, and for thematic emphasis”. She comments that “Grief becomes a process of creation” (xi).

In *Born to Slow Horses* (2005) this creativity is merged with the will and the desire for exorcism. This is not simply because of the ways in which Brathwaite incorporates Tia and Christophene as dual forces that are in need, perhaps, of deliverance from spite, though Christophene is mapped as a helpless and silent observer and recorder. It is more significant that the poem reworked from “Dais” (1977) articulates the very bone scape of hunger of the young girl.

```
ann quiet an long
yu cud see how she fingers
like splints or like splinters
```
how she natty head dread
so is ketch every hook
an eye in de nettle an gras a de hickey (25)³

The poem that follows from this “Days” – “Nights” sequence is called IWA. As it moves it becomes increasingly a wail.

my mother say I be alone
and when I cry (31).

This cry forces the past to the surface, but it is not only an image of Columbus’s ships that we see, but another poem from the past made new:

after this breach of the sea’s balance treaty. how will new maps
be drafted? who will suggest
a new tentative frontier?
how will the sky dawn now? (35)

This gives birth to:

See?

I see
my childrens childrens childrens children summr-
saulting at the bottom of the dark (36)

which opens up the poem as womb to reshape and restructure a previous poem from the limbo section of Islands (28-33). This poem, previously entitled “Shepherd”, is now no longer in limbo or in doubt and suggests here that the small hope with which “Shepherd” ended has resonated over the decades and returned in a new form. The poem is now pared of words and phrases and made lean and tall — reaching the sky and resembling in this precise sculpting the lean blades of Ann’s shoulders that also grew tall.

This ghosting and reclamation of a possession poem linked as it is to Christophene’s story becomes a new benediction and form of remembering. It has emerged from an epic struggle marred by prejudice and pain and silence.

Other Caribbean poets and storytellers have used different methods to give utterance to silence and forms of healing. As has been seen, Walcott, Harris and Brathwaite have meditated on the shaping nature of suffering and its residual presence in the national and indi-
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vidual psyche. Dennis Scott and Jennifer Rahim are two other writers whose work has also focused in some measure on silenced responses to trauma. Scott’s *Dreadwalk* (1982) and the collection of short stories by Rahim, *Songster and Other Stories*, are excellent examples of two different reflections on silence and trauma. In particular, what comes easily to mind is a story called “Going Out” which in its rhythmic development echoes the very cadences of the deeply traumatized. So deep is the pressure on the mind of the young mother as she walks, bathes, dresses and talks to her dead baby that the fact of death remains to the very last unuttered. What is mapped is movement back and forth—a replica of the mind seeking to busy itself as it refuses comprehension. There is also an unfolding pattern of cyclical and repeated abuse that seems, in the way the story is told, to suggest that somehow a connection is being made with a very deep past. The beginning is to be found in the end.

Much of Rahim’s writing searches for a way of problematising events that have occurred in the past and that cannot or may not be held up to scrutiny. The story of the young girl, whose aunt’s boyfriend rapes her, is hidden within the symbol of a snake. Oddly enough there is a real snake, which appears to be innocuous; but it is significant that this belongs to the alcoholic man who gives her the first note within which she will write—in a kind of diary—or a form of testimony. The snake image as one containing all the elements of something hidden in a man’s trousers, something that appears out of nowhere and is covered by soothing words, while yet to be feared, is quite potent. It allows the writer to explore that very silence that makes this a powerful piece of writing. Everything is shrouded in that space where a child’s voice may not utter the horrors she experiences, but where she can only use her imagination to draw shapes that make gestures towards what has occurred.

Rahim’s early poetry also sought to create architecture on the page. But the later works give way to new ideas, one of which suggests a link to Brathwaite in her creative use of the gift of computer technology. The computer and the WEB allow the often unspeakable word AIDS to be uttered in quite novel ways. The author chooses to use the email text—perhaps for reasons that many of us who email frequently may already know: emails lead to misunderstandings because they lack tonality and the capacity for nuances. Here then is the strength that they provide for this poet. The very starkness and abruptness, the sheer anonymity of the works typed on white screen with only a pseudonym, with only hieroglyphs between pain and utterance, act as sheets of emotion that leave no comfort zone of nuance.

In Dennis Scott’s *Dreadwalk* the hieroglyphic nature of the po-
etry reflects the calcification of flesh and bone from sheer misery. In “Neighbours” the poem turns on the misfit of the word as the tongue appears to lick its way in its effete path as it swallows up the misfortune of those who live in cardboard boxes, while the poet sits snug in the comfort of his televisual world.

Or more potently, as in “Guard-ring” it is possible to hear the reverberations as the foot stalks its pathway in the madness of misery and fear —powerfully articulated and given voice out of silence:

> At noon like a cage
> the roots hump over him
> the sun smears its yellow
> on his eyes, his bones
> shake like dried fern.
> Inside he spindles
> like crust; half-eaten,
> he hides from dogs,
> breathing. Silence (Scott 31).

This is language that graphs the depths of long and historic suffering and its silences.

**NOTES**

1. See also Harris’s essay “The Writer and Society” in *Tradition, the Writer and Society* (1967: 48-64) where he situates the writer as a lightning rod.


3. See the earlier version of this in *Mother Poem*, Oxford: OUP, 1977: 67-72. There are differences in shape and language.

4. These are from typescripts since the stories are as yet unpublished. The title of the collection is “Songster and Other Stories”.

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The Tourist and the Native: Rereading Myths of Conquest in Lucy and Last Virgin in Paradise

Carolyn Cooper

The homogenising, touristic construction of “the islands” as exotic, feminised places, erotically disposed to accommodate the passing fancies of the hedonistic visitor, is a central motif of the deliberately generic “Pacific” play, Last Virgin in Paradise, written by Vilsoni Hereniko and Teresia Teaiwa. With wicked humour their play enacts a post-colonial drama of appropriation, displacement and exile. The multivalent themes of this play are remarkably similar to the preoccupations of the “remittance” novel Lucy, written by the migrant Antiguan, Jamaica Kincaid. Both nativist texts reread the myths of discovery and conquest that are embedded in the transnational project of tourism; these texts also examine the contradictory motivations of island migration that drive the native to escape the hellish prison of paradise.

Both Lucy and Last Virgin in Paradise subvert the seductive binary fictions of “centre” and “margin,” “tourist” and “native,” “self” and “other,” “male” and “female” that are inscribed in the imperialist project of travel writing. These revisionist narratives challenge the Gauguinesque stereotypes of romanticised native life that still continue to define the cultural politics of contemporary island-tourism. These subversive texts of islands propose an alternative archaeology of desire: unlike the tourist who longs to embrace the native, the native desperately attempts to escape the trap of the exotic. Migration becomes a necessary rite of passage, transforming the native into the desired other, the tourist.

Jamaica Kincaid’s polemical extended essay, A Small Place, provides an illuminating ideological meta-text for this reading of both Last Virgin in Paradise and Lucy. Salman Rushdie describes A Small Place as “[a] jeremiad of great clarity and force that one might have called torrential were the language not so finely controlled.” In this biting
anti-travelogue, Kincaid abandons the mask of fiction to speak politics more directly. In an act of transgressive straight-talking she examines the tourist industry in Antigua, and, by extension, in the Caribbean and far beyond as yet another neo-colonialist project that disfigures the native with the markings of the exotic.

Kincaid painstakingly exposes the grotesque body of the innately ugly tourist as a legible sign of the diseased body politic from which s/he issues. Everyday, communal rituals that ordinarily define the tourist’s sense of home and identity eventually become an oppressive trap from which escape becomes essential. Addressing the archetypal Tourist directly, Kincaid catalogues in fine detail the gradual process of degeneration from “whole person” to parasitic feeder on the suffering of the world. In delineating this process of transformation, Kincaid clearly intends to call into question notions of “normalcy.” She dislocates the tourist on foreign soil, dispossessing him/her of the presumed power and freedom that travel affords. Touring becomes a temporary panacea for the ills of home; it is not a permanent solution to the problem of endemic meaninglessness to which the tourist must inevitably return:

...at home on your street, your church, in community activities, your job, at home with your family, your relatives, your friends – you are a whole person. But one day, when you are sitting somewhere, alone in that crowd, and that awful feeling of displacedness comes over you, and really, as an ordinary person you are not well equipped to look too far inward and set yourself right, because being ordinary is already so taxing, and being ordinary takes all you have out of you, and though the words “I must get away” do not actually pass your lips, you make a leap from being that nice blob just sitting like a boob in your amniotic sac of the modern experience to being a person visiting heaps of death and ruin and feeling alive and inspired at the sight of it; to being a person lying on some faraway beach, your stilled body stinking and glistening in the sand, looking like something first forgotten, then remembered, then not important enough to go back for; 

Helmut Klinghorst, the anti-hero of Last Virgin in Paradise, fits perfectly the role of Ugly Tourist that is demarcated with such seemingly dispassionate precision by Jamaica Kincaid. Klinghorst, a retired psychology professor from Europe, introduces himself in the opening scene of the play in terms that fix him in the role of self-deluded hedonist: “I’ve come here to get me an island wife. A virgin” (1). His desire
for the unmarked body of a “virgin” immediately locates his fantasy in the realm of all those other imperialist fictions of discovery and capture of virgin territory that have been canonised in the body of Western literature.

Klinghorst’s search for the perfectly whole virgin leads him to travel the undifferentiated islands of the Pacific, whose common identity is their inability to yield a single virgin for his dispossessing touch:

Do you know that I looked everywhere for a virgin wife and couldn't find one? I’ve been to New Guinea, Vanuata, Solomons, Fiji, Guam, Saipan, Samoa, Nauru... I couldn’t find one. Not a single one who is untouched. Then I came here, and within two weeks, I find one! Yes, I’ve found the perfect one! (4)

Klinghorst, the incredulous, cannot believe his good fortune. And he also cannot entertain the prospect that Hina, his virgin bride, could possibly not want the rescue he proposes: “Does she have a choice? . . . Of course she wants to go. Why would anybody want to stay here on this island that’s got nothing to offer but pigs, flies and cemeteries!” (3). “And virgins!” (3) a cynical character interjects. This disjunctive yoking of pigs, flies, cemeteries and virgins encapsulates the absurdity of Klinghorst’s contradictory reading of the body of the native.

Deluded in his role of balding knight in not-so-shining armour, Klinghorst dare not answer his own rhetorical question. For if Hina’s reason for marrying him is only to escape the very decadence he seeks to embrace, this disequilibrium of desire underscores the mutually exploitative nature of their relationship. Any man will do. Just as any virgin will do. When his much sought after virgin appears to have eluded his grasp Klinghorst rationalises his obsessive desire for a virgin in decidedly materialist terms:

Ever since I was a little boy, I’ve always wanted to own what was new. I’ve never liked anything that’s used, old, or worn out. I suppose my being here is an extension of that need to be first.
You see, I’ve been married three times before. None of my other wives was a virgin before we married. (39)

Jean, the Australian academic tourist as anthropologist to whom Klinghorst confesses his weakness, is no less satirised. In the opening frame of the play she describes her own project, another version of the quest for Pacific sex:
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Fulbright has given me $20,000 to study sexual harassment among the Marawan people. I’m from Harvard; arrived nearly two months ago; I haven’t quite mastered the language yet, but I’m making good progress. (1)

As the scene unfolds it becomes obvious that her progress is not as good as she pretends. Scene 1 ends with Jean’s full confession to the audience of her complicated motives for coming to the Pacific, and her limited success in this enterprise:

Do you know why I’m really here? I’ll tell you. I’m here to write the definitive work on sexuality among the Marawan people. My book will make me famous...Coming For Sex, that’s the tentative title. I can see it now, my book in the hands of thousands of graduate students across the globe, listed as required reading in every anthropology class. (pause) If only these natives would answer and return my questionnaires! So far, I’ve got only 10 out of 200 back. I don’t understand...they’re all poor and can use some money, so why aren’t they responding! Mmm...what should I do? Jeke...yes, I’ll get Jeke to collect those questionnaires! Jeke’s one of my informants...funny guy, and not bad-looking either! I wonder what he’d be like...Oh well...never mind.” (13)

Academic tourism, as much as the unthinking kind, is clearly the butt of the play’s satire. An essential condition of Jean’s research is the willingness of her informants to engage in the commercialised exchange of information for money: a kind of academic prostitution. In the light of the play’s critique of this dehumanising politics of knowledge, I feel obliged to make my own confessional statement. As a Caribbeanist who dared during the 1993-94 academic year to try to study “Pacific Women Writers” on a three-month Association of Commonwealth Universities Fellowship, I, myself, am well aware of the perils of academic tourism. However, I would like to believe that I am no kin of Jean. After all, I went not for sex but for gender politics.

Nevertheless, I do think it essential to interrogate the presumptuous politics of this paper – its comparison of two “island” texts that seem to share a common ideological base. My own eliding of difference in this comparative project can itself be seen as a politics of appropriation; an academic version of the more familiar touristic reduction of the distinctive cultures of the Pacific and the Caribbean to a common islandness. I hope that my own project of attempting to study the commonalities of our colonialist cultures is not an act of neo-imperialist
cultural politics. Further, I hope that my informants – the authors of this play I have chosen for comparison – prove more trustworthy than Jean’s reluctant paid informers.

Given my ambiguous placement as an outsider with an insider’s predilection for irony, for me, one of the most engaging characters in Last Virgin in Paradise is Temanu. She introduces herself thus: “Temanu’s my name, history graduate at the Australian National University. Been away from home since I was twelve. Now I’m here to find my roots. Just arrived, yesterday in fact” (1). It is Temanu who systematically harrasses the outsiders, Jean and Helmut, about their positionality, methodically undermining the fictions they erect to protect themselves from scrutiny.

Quite early in the play, Temanu cynically questions the virginity of Helmut’s prized conquest, thus sowing the seeds of doubt that the play’s denouement will harvest. It is Temanu who dismisses Jean as “[a] bloody nosy foreigner who cares for nothing but her research” (9). But Temanu has her own vulnerabilities which Jean gleefully exposes: “You’re a fine one to talk. You return after twelve years and what do you do? You book into the only motel on this island. If you are so committed, why don’t you go and live with your relatives?” (26).

It is the apparently naive Hina who answers in an amusingly straightforward way the questions of identity and identification that seem to paralyze Temanu. Hina asks her a simple question: “How long you away?” (6). Temanu’s complicated answer reveals more than she imagines: “Twelve years, studying about the palagi and their way of life, their history, their language. One day I realised that I didn’t know my own history or the Marawan language. Then I decided to come here. . . . I want to know who I am” (6). Taking Temanu’s words literally, Hina establishes a simple genealogy of affiliation: “I know who you are. You Temanu, daughter of Etika who marry a white woman. Etika is my father’s older brother. Your parents take you to Australia for good education. We related” (7).

It is the relatedness of these women, despite differences of social class and experience, that the play explores with such ironic force. Temanu’s later impassioned defense of Hina’s right to gender equality is also an articulation of her own desire to obliterate the act of rape that her Australian boyfriend committed against her. In her quarrel with Jean at Helmut and Hina’s wedding, Temanu deconstructs the myth of an “authentic” prelapsarian native culture: “Marawan women must learn to fight for their rights. This means there’s nothing authentic anymore! No longer do the Marawan people dance the way they did when Captain Cook first arrived” (25).

Jean’s response explains not only her own but also Helmut’s ob-
sessive quest for virginal paradise – an old-world, Edenic perfection predating the rapacious thrust of invasive European conquest: “Why is it so wrong to hope that somewhere in this world there is a culture that has remained pure, untainted by Western influence?” (25). It is Hina, herself, who answers that question in her seemingly naive way. She refuses to allow the well-intentioned Temanu to lock her into yet another stereotypical definition of her appropriate contemporary role. Hina refuses to allow Temanu to speak for her, however much they are related as sisters in solidarity against racist, patriarchal domination.

Hina chooses the freedom to experience life beyond the confines of her familiar island culture. When Temanu tries to convince her to abandon Helmut, Hina adamantly claims the native’s right to take a tour: “Sister, don’t stop me. You go around, you see the world, but not I. I never go out of this little island, never. I want to get out. I want to see the world, to experience it myself. And I want a good education too. This man, he my passport” (51). She has no qualms about using this passport for all it is worth. Hina confesses her exploitation of Helmut’s delusions of conquest of virginal territory. Having shared with Temanu the secret that she is *not* the last virgin in paradise, she dismisses Helmut as not worth a moment’s concern: “Right now, let him dream his dream. Let him think I virgin. That his problem. But don’t worry. I have brain too. Like you!” (51).

The play thus ends with a series of comic reversals: the retired psychology professor cleverly psyched by the cunning ‘virgin;’ the knowing anthropologist who proves to be a virgin; the clever university graduate who is not quite as clever as her unschooled cousin. Hina’s story, particularly her self-serving flight from paradise at Helmut’s expense, illustrates the truth of the symbiotic tourist/native relationship that Jamaica Kincaid delineates in *A Small Place*. There is no love lost between the tourist and the native despite the romantic fantasies that inform their coupling:

That the native does not like the tourist is not hard to explain. For every native of every place is a potential tourist, and every tourist is a native of somewhere. Every native everywhere lives a life of overwhelming and crushing banality and boredom and desperation and depression, and every deed, good and bad, is an attempt to forget this. Every native would like a rest, every native would like a tour. But some natives – most natives in the world – cannot go anywhere. They are too poor. They are too poor to go anywhere. They are too poor to escape the reality of their lives; and they are too poor to live properly in the place where they live, which
is the very place you, the tourist, want to go – so when the natives see you, the tourist, they envy you, they envy your ability to leave your own banality and boredom, they envy your ability to turn their own banality and boredom into a source of pleasure for yourself.\textsuperscript{5}

In \textit{Lucy}, Jamaica Kincaid allows her native to take a tour. The protagonist leaves her unnamed island home, probably Antigua, for an unnamed North American city, probably New York, to work as an \textit{au pair}. The family to whom she is employed represents upper case Privilege, the perennial privilege of the tourist who is free to roam the globe in search of virgins and other curiosities:

The household in which I lived was made up of a husband, a wife, and the four girl children. The husband and wife looked alike and their four children looked just like them. In photographs of themselves, which they placed all over the house, their six yellow-haired heads of various sizes were bunched together as if they were a bouquet of flowers tied together by an unseen string. In the pictures, they smiled out at the world, giving the impression that they found everything in it unbearably wonderful. And it was not a farce, their smiles. From wherever they had gone, and they seemed to have been all over the world, they brought back some tiny memento, and they could recite its history from its very beginnings. Even when a little rain fell, they would admire the way it streaked through the blank air.\textsuperscript{6}

\textit{Lucy} is a perceptive young woman who relentlessly critiques the fictions of domestic bliss that her adoptive family desperately tries to construct: “How nice everyone was to me, though, saying that I should regard them as my family and make myself at home. I believed them to be sincere, for I knew that such a thing would not be said to a member of their real family” (7-8). \textit{Lucy} cunningly subverts the power relationship between native and visitor, insider and outsider. Although she is a paid servant, she appropriates the imperious eye/I of the Tourist, passing judgment on all she surveys.

Thus, for example, Lucy takes an instant dislike to Dinah, Mariah’s treacherous friend, because of her imperious refusal to locate her within a specific socio-cultural context of origin:

I had met Dinah the night after we arrived here on our holiday, and I did not like her. This was because the first thing she
said to me when Mariah introduced us was ‘So you are from the islands?’ I don’t know why, but the way she said it made a fury rise up in me. I was about to respond to her in this way: ‘Which islands exactly do you mean? The Hawaiian Islands? The islands that make up Indonesia, or what?’ And I was going to say it in a voice that I hoped would make her feel like a piece of nothing, which was the way she had made me feel in the first place. (56)

It is this patronizing diminution of the native to “a piece of nothing,” that angers Lucy so completely. Observing the guests at a dinner party of her employers, she assumes the variable perspective of both native and visitor to assert an identity that defies the obliterating anonymity of the tourist’s reductive gaze. The guests, for whom she has nothing but contempt, are described as having “names like Peters, Smith, Jones and Richards – names that were easy on the tongue, names that made the world spin. They had all been to the islands – by that, they meant the place where I was from – and had fun there.” (64-65)

As a native in her own right, Lucy confesses with typical perversity:

I wished once again that I came from a place where no one wanted to go, a place that was filled with slag and unexpectedly erupting volcanoes, or where a visitor was turned into a pebble on setting foot there; somehow it made me ashamed to come from a place where the only thing to be said about it was “I had fun when I was there.” (64-65)

In order to escape subjection to the omnivorous desire of the tourist on the make, Lucy is willing to relinquish the commoditised “beauty” of her island home. Embedded in her malicious anti-fairy-tale fantasy of the supernatural reversal of fortune for the unwary tourist is an intensely political consciousness that seeks the transformation of colonialis relations of domination in the “real” world.

In Lucy’s revisionist, anti-imperial travel narrative, derided Christopher Columbus becomes the archetypal tourist as conquistador who in his acts of senseless labelling vainly attempts to appropriate the native other. In her own act of counter-discursive naming, Lucy defines her sense of location in both geographical and ideological terms. She contrasts the confinement of the native in a small place with the license of the tourist, let loose in the whole world:

I was born on an island, a very small island, twelve miles long and eight miles wide; yet when I left it at nineteen years
of age I had never set foot on three-quarters of it. I had recently met someone who was born on the other side of the world from me but had visited this island on which my family had lived for generations; this person, a woman, had said to me, ‘What a beautiful place,’ and she named a village by the sea and then went on to describe a view that was unknown to me. At the time I was so ashamed I could hardly make a reply, for I had come to believe that people in my position in the world should know everything about the place they are from. I know this: it was discovered by Christopher Columbus in 1493; Columbus never set foot there but only named it in passing, after a church in Spain. He could not have known that he would have so many things to name, and I imagined how hard he had to rack his brain after he ran out of names honoring his benefactors, the saints he cherished, events important to him. A task like that would have killed a thoughtful person, but he went on to live a very long life.

(134-35)

The angry question that Lucy silently keeps on asking of her smug employer, Mariah – “[h]ow does a person get to be that way?” (17) is profoundly philosophical. It effectively turns the Native’s banality and boredom into a source of pleasure for the Visitor. More importantly, this question discloses the fundamental perversity of the imperial project that leaves no uncontaminated, autonomous space for the survival of the “other”: “Mariah says, ‘I have Indian blood in me,’ and underneath everything I could swear she says it as if she were announcing her possession of a trophy. How do you get to be the sort of victor who can claim to be the vanquished also?” (40-41).

Lucy reads her own Indianness in a non-exhibitionist, intimate way that is also fundamentally politicised:

To look at her, there was nothing remotely like an Indian about her. Why claim a thing like that? I myself had Indian blood in me. My grandmother is a Carib Indian. That makes me one-quarter Carib Indian. But I don’t go around saying that I have some Indian blood in me. The Carib Indians were good sailors, but I don’t like to be on the sea; I only like to look at it. To me my grandmother is my grandmother, not an Indian. My grandmother is alive; the Indians she came from are all dead. If someone could get away with it, I am sure they would put my grandmother in a museum, as an example of something now extinct in nature, one of a handful still
alive. In fact, one of the museums to which Mariah had taken me devoted a whole section to people, all dead, who were more or less related to my grandmother (40).

Kincaid’s critique of the cultural politics of the museum enterprise privileges life over death, nature over culture, freedom over containment, the indigenous over the imperialist. The museum becomes a premier site where the spoils of empire are gloatingly displayed. Somewhat like Mariah who can claim to be both victor and victim, the self-appointed, imperious guardians of the heritage of the entire world can unashamedly assert their god-given right to stolen property, ceremoniously displayed in elaborate burial vaults. After all, as victims of the collective incompetence of third-rate, Third World States, they are merely protecting “world heritage” from the carelessness of philistines who are clearly not entitled to possess their own cultural artefacts. Much too good for them. The price of identification with the other is the appropriation of identity. The Oxford English Dictionary definition of the word ‘museum’ encodes layers of contradictory meanings: “Seat of the muses...The university building erected at Alexandria by Ptolemy Soter....A building or apartment dedicated to the pursuit of learning or the arts; a study; a library...A building used for storing and exhibiting objects illustrative of antiquities, natural history, art, etc.” From the seat of the muses to a warehouse for hot property, the pejoration of the museum inscribes imperialism.

Somewhat paradoxically, Lucy’s assumption of the tourist’s privilege to cross borders and transgress boundaries makes her able to both despise the mindless tourist and empathise with the bored native who migrates from the prison of conventional respectability. She describes her encounter with the paintings of an unnamed Gauguin in terms that both privilege the desired culture of liberating artistic production and simultaneously undermine the related culture of the book which, museum-like, entombs the past, rewriting history from a purely masculinist perspective:

I understood finding the place you are born in an unbearable prison and wanting something completely different from what you are familiar with, knowing it represents a haven. I wondered about the details of his despair, for I felt it would comfort me to know. Of course his life could be found in the pages of a book; I had just begun to notice that the lives of men always are. He was shown to be a man rebelling against an established order he had
found corrupt; and even though he was doomed to defeat – he died an early death – he had the perfume of the hero about him. I was not a man; I was a young woman from the fringes of the world, and when I left my home I had wrapped around my shoulders the mantle of a servant. (95)

Lucy’s passionately optimistic reading of Gauguin’s life finds a satirical echo in Klinghorst’s adoration of his virgin bride, Hina: “She’s more beautiful than the women in Gauguin’s paintings. Don’t you agree? She’s got the hair and the skin colour, but not the fat. I’m a lucky man indeed! (to Hina) Darling, why don’t you stand against the sky, and let us have a look” (11). Hina is elevated/reduced to the status of museum piece, a supposedly invaluable work of art. But since she proves to be no virgin, this scene of multiple misrepresentation resonates with comic irony. Helmut assumes that not-too-fatty virginal life represents art even more perfectly than Gauguin’s corpulent art ever represented virginal island life. So he gets what he deserves – a beautiful work of artifice.

Lucy herself employs the trope of painting to define the process of transformation she undergoes during her sojourn among the North American natives:

I understood that I was inventing myself, and that I was doing this more in the way of a painter than in the way of a scientist. I could not count on precision or calculation; I could only count on intuition. I did not have anything exactly in mind, but when the picture was complete I would know. I did not have position, I did not have money at my disposal. I had memory, I had anger, I had despair. (134)

The raw material of compelling fiction. Lucy’s rite of passage is an act of self-invention, radically different from the self-deluding enterprise that is Klinghorst’s quest for virginal paradise. Whereas chauvinist Klinghorst, in order to compensate for his short-comings, tenaciously clings to his illusions of first conquest of virgin territory, Lucy, somewhat like Hina, despises virginity as a sign of her vulnerability to the seductions of patriarchy. Lucy describes the “loss” of virginity thus:

There was Tanner, and he was the first boy with whom I did everything possible you can do with a boy. The very first time we did everything we wanted to do, he spread the towel on the floor of his room for me to lie down on, because the old springs in his bed made too much noise; it was a white towel, and when I got up it was stained with blood. When he
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saw it, he first froze with fear and then smiled and said ‘Oh,’ a note too triumphant in his voice, and I don’t know how but I found the presence of mind to say, ‘It’s just my period coming on.’ I did not care about being a virgin and had long been looking forward to the day when I could rid myself of that status, but when I saw how much it mattered to him to be the first boy I had been with, I could not give him such a hold over me. (82-83)

Both Lucy and Hina, eschewing virginity, claim the patriarchal privilege of knowingly exploring and conquering the world. It is Hina, initially seeming so naive, oppressed and exploited, who ultimately articulates with such lucidity the paradox of rootedness and freedom that is the perennial condition of the native who claims the right to become a tourist. When Temanu warns her to never forget her roots, Hina’s confident response is “I know my roots. You come to find roots, that fine, but I . . . I want to find wings too” (52). In Kincaid’s terms: “Every native would like to find a way out, every native would like a rest, every native would like a tour” (18). Both Lucy and Last Virgin in Paradise reverse the neo-colonialist power relations on which the texts, at first, appear to be constructed. Jamaica Kincaid, Vilsoni Hereniko and Teresia Teaiwa celebrate the victory of the triumphant native “from the fringes of the world” who learns to elude the grasp of patriarchy and exploit the fantasies of the trusting tourist to her own advantage. The last laugh is at the expense of would-be conquistador.

Notes


2 I am indebted to Kezia Page for the construct ‘remittance text’ which she theorises in this way: “on the literary level a remittance text is a way of constructing home in one’s mind, preserving memories either by re-inventing new ones, or calling up old ones.” “What If He Did Not Have a Sister [Who Lived in the United States]?” Jamaica Kincaid’s My Brother as Remittance Text.” Small Axe 21, October 2006, 41.


4 Ibid., 15-16. Subsequent references noted parenthetically in text.


The contemporary Caribbean stands, according to Caryl Phillips, at a political and moral crossroads, and is a continent of islands still searching for an identity, recovering from the colonial past whilst being increasingly under the “ever-widening shadow” of the United States (146, 221). Historically, the decades of colonial legacy and post-independence have been characterised by violence, tyrannical dictatorships, and other problems relating to governance, education, and the ongoing situation of illegal immigration. The Caribbean “experience” is also one that is bound up with images of migrancy, travel, fluidities of arrivals, dwellings and departures, and relocations—whether between towns, islands, or continents. “Home” is a fluid concept that generates and implicates jumbled-up races and uncertain destinations. If the imagined home is elusive, a patria defined by a dreamed-of lost paradise, so the quality of time can also be defined as a lost dimension: the dispersal characteristic of diaspora is both temporal and spatial. Much as the absent continent of Africa haunts the memory of the descendents of its originally dispersed peoples, the past is a lost territory of experience, a temporal palimpsest written over with new history, language, religion, and economic structure.

The harrowing past (as exemplified in the damage done by traumas such as slavery, or later postcolonial dictatorships and despotic regimes) consequently renders present time inaccessible since the past has become paradoxically inescapable, non-locatable, and unreconstructable. Without a past, the present is without foundations, and the future problematically projected—as indicated, for example, in the premise of Fred D’Aguiar’s novel Dear Future, and in Edwidge Dandicat’s “The Funeral Singer” where the characters toast to “the terrible days behind us and the uncertain ones ahead” (Dew Breaker 181).

As the empire has written back, authors have turned to fictional
explications of experience as a search for a sense of empowerment either social or political, and indeed, as is widely discussed, literature may also be a cathartic technique of expunging memory, and thus writing becomes a means both to remember and to forget. Fanon, in his famous exhortation in *The Wretched of the Earth* to the peoples of every colonised country to rediscover their past, speaks of a similar process in the development of colonial literature as a nationalist literature of combat, where the sense of struggle is necessary to overcome and readjust the time values of the nation. While writers may not see themselves as literary warriors in this way, nevertheless, such literature remains a process of exploring the aftermath and implications of violent experience, often at one remove, where the text is written as an attempt to write away current and historical trauma, and to redress traumatic memory, whilst simultaneously rendering a sense of justice and coherence to incoherence through shared transcendences of cultural location, recurring imagery, and a cohesion of repeated family patterns.

In order to elucidate these principles, this article will examine recent novels of two Caribbean writers, now both resident in the USA, Fred D’Aguiar and Edwidge Dandicat, both of whom, within paradigms of searching for meaning beyond the pain of historically-forged connections with ‘patria’, propose an evocative interconnectivity between the imagined bodies of self and nation. The overall theme of this paper is located within overlapping paradigms of home/exile, past/present, language/silence, and culpability/forgiveness. It analyses novels originating or relating to the two nations of the Caribbean: specifically Haiti and Guyana, in order to ask whether a reconciliation of these opposites provides the possibility of establishing a “new horizon” of wholeness out of fragments, both textual and experiential.

The Guyanese writer Fred D’Aguiar emphasises the continuing importance of narratives as “healing histories” (“Caribbean Diaspora” n.p.). His works examine the curative quality of writing: stories that re-enact history and take the reader through pain in order to gain growth and insight—a process of enlightenment. His novel *Bethany Bettany* utilises the symbol of a young girl’s body as a trope for the positioning of an unnamed country in the throws of a post-independence conflict. Her double name endorses the duality of her national heritage, native and colonial, and, moreover, her family name (Abrahams) significantly also places her as part of the patriarchal dynasty from which three religions claim their origins. Thus, she can be seen to represent a colonial Everywoman, the daughter or product of centuries of conflict and ignorance. Having apparently no control over the abuse that others inflict upon her, ultimately Bethany represents a community of selves, embodying not only community but also the natural environment.
Finally she represents the annihilation of these separate selves that is required for healing to begin.

She is a classic example of the triply disenfranchised and oppressed colonial subject (black, female and poor) yet she possesses a unique defence mechanism to avoid the pain and the obliteration of self that the frequent beatings at the hands of her uncle and family are aimed to produce. She is able to transport herself through thresholds, such as doors, and into private spaces where she can witness her oppressors in order better to understand them. This technique she calls “flattening”, a term that describes how her body seems to lose its identity (an identity already fractured through the juxtaposition of her bifurcated name): a loss of bodily self through which she goes beyond self to identify with the other. “Only a mist of me exists, smoke of my flesh, bones and blood, wisp of my body” (D’Aguiar Bethany 35). While in this state of suspended self, “I think door, not the word but a picture of it” then finds herself relocated “with the speed of that thought” (38), and she is in the other room watching her oppressor—“in his state of grief and penitence”—the better to understand him (or her). In the attempt to comprehend such apparently arbitrary violence, she is compelled to follow her abusers and watch them, to flatten herself into a non-presence. The quality of disinterested witnessing divorces the mind from the pain being inflicted on the body, so that she is able to cure her “hurt” (179).

Fred D’Aguiar describes how Bethany’s technique of flattening is merely one of the imagination (Grace “Interview”). Just as it is the role of the imagination to fill in the blanks of history, or of the creative writer to project a “healing” narrative through imaginatively reconstructing traumatic events and rendering them in a manner to promote empathy and understanding, so individual imagination fills the gaps between experience and knowledge. D’Aguiar’s use of the faculty of imagination here is reminiscent of Wordsworth’s Imagination, “which, in truth, / Is but another name of absolute strength/ And clearest insight” (Prelude XIII).

Memory is structured by the imagination and the emotional response; imagination is a way through which characters, authors and readers are able to overcome trauma. The importance of the imagination has, by Anees Sheikh for example, been documented in terms of healing – both in terms of the healing potential of imagination in disease and in the healing imagery of the sacred and literature in cultural traditions around the world. Peter Malekin and Ralph Yarrow also locate the role of the imagination within both eastern and western philosophical traditions, from Plotinus to Blake and through the Romantics to twentieth century dramatists such as Beckett, and suggest that, “at
its most potent, imagination discloses wholeness via different modes of consciousness, which allow us to live it. In itself, imagination extends wholeness into form, time and space” (58). Samuel Taylor Coleridge famously, and with continuing relevance to trauma theory, refers to the imagination as

the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as the repetition in the finite mind of the infinite I AM. [...] It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still, at all events, it struggles to idealise and to unify. (167)

In order to survive physically and spiritually Bethany must find meaning; she is not able to exist with meaningless violence, and it is through her imagination that she is able to impose a unity on the fragments and create a reason for being and becoming. Were it not for the continual punishments inflicted upon her, “there would not be a need to convert my body from something into nothing” (53).

Bethany as a non-presence mirrors the condition described by Homi Bhabha in terms of the masking of self, the colonial identity of “no presence”, a trope of “unrepresentable identity” (Richards 294). The fear that she is literally “nobody” haunts her until she can gain recognition of the other, and thus herself. Individual morphs into national, hence the creation of a communal culpability; her means of gaining agency also implicates the national situation: “Flatness only permits me to raid the private lives of those who beat me, just as the country should only have dominion over its willing subjects” (D’Aguiar 45). Just as the family members are individually brutal, ignorant and abusive, so society as a whole is responsible for the eventual collapse into civil war. Depicted as a neo-colonial conflict over land-resources, involving American logging companies: the schizophrenic struggle of a country to save itself from becoming a deforested desert is one in which Bethany is tragically involved. Caught up in the camp life of the “terrorists”, she is gravely injured as an American missile explodes nearby; yet in the final analogy of her body and the nation’s being “patched up” (310), past and present conflicts, love and hate, are to some extent resolved.

Edward Said argues that:

To think about distant places, to colonize them, to populate or depopulate them: all of this occurs on, about, or because of land. The actual geographical possession of land is what empire in the final analysis is all about. (93)

Thus the narrative of forging concepts of individual identity cannot be
divorced from the political and geographical framework in landscape in as much as in government.

D’Aguiar uses the image of woman’s body as indicative of the colonial condition of the Caribbean island where the novel is set, a culture abused, confused and breaking up. The power of the imagination, mentioned earlier in terms of the individual mind-body, is also reminiscent of Benedict Anderson’s notion of the nation as an imagined community, which is structured from bonds of fraternity and necessity, fact and fantasy, unity and diversity (1983). More recently, Kwame Anthony Appiah has delineated the cultural distant other as “the imaginary stranger”, one who in the cosmopolitan world need not remain an abstraction but “real and present”, sharing social space and coming within the sphere of cognitive understanding (87-89). Moreover, cultural theory and postcolonial theory in particular now recognises, “that human existence is at least as much about fantasy and desire as it is about truth and reason”. (Eagleton 4)

The diasporic experience is a voyage “in” (as Edward Said discusses) as well as away from, and here D’Aguiar highlights the post-colonial dilemma of centre versus periphery, centralising through the metaphor of indigenous trees and woods the connection between colony and the centre of empire in London. The capital is also home to thousands of Caribbean migrants, including Bethany’s parents, struggling to integrate themselves into a frequently hostile white Britain. The interconnectivity of cultures and continents is epitomised by the green-heart tree that is taken from the distant colony literally to prop up the symbol of empire—The Thames—maintaining and supporting London’s continued functioning. “‘This wood bracing these banks comes all the way from the Amazonian basin. Greenheart wood is the toughest woods in the world. It’s been here for two hundred years’” (246) explains Bethany’s father. Stuart Hall also proposes in an autobiographical comment that ‘People like me who came to England in the 1950’s have been there for centuries; symbolically, we have been there for centuries. I was coming home” (480).

Bethany too is described as being the “greenheart wood” (29, 49). While she represents the fragmentation of self, family and nation, and is moreover, through this symbolisation as being like greenheart wood, she is also portrayed as the connecting link between colonial periphery and the heart of the empire. Here, however, D’Aguiar emphasises that that heart is not “dark” (associated with death) but “green” (associated with life). When associated with the female characters it also resonates with emotion: the mother wants to keep a piece of that wood next to her heart to remember her husband (246); Bethany finally finds physical love in the protection of the green forest (273).
Bethany's birth and body thus are multidimensional images of the postcolonial condition—the Fanonian revolution that relies on the summoning up of past history for the projection of hopeful futures. The play on the types of woods and their differing qualities that become associated with the characters of both Bethany and her mother (associated with eucalyptus) is also used as a technique to forge links between human and natural environments, and the contrast between the woods’ uses in times of peace or war—which come together in the novel’s final chapters. The utilisation of the tree imagery implicates a further symbolism of the roots/routes dynamic of the third passage and its consequent diaspora, as well as expanding notions of the destabilisation of culture. The eucalyptus and the greenheart trees both originate in and reflect divergent colonial territories, histories, and migrations. The trees, like the women associated with them, have been uprooted and transplanted – between home and empire, periphery and centre. These representations also expand notions of who are the perpetrators of violence beyond the individuals in the novel to a broader collective responsibility.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon insists that a sense of national identity—a national consciousness that gives form to “that revolutionary capital which is the people”—is required to be forged out of remembering the past. Yet just as its remnant shards constitute the past, it is in these layers of thought and memory that sense must be made from incoherence. The novels of the Haitian-American writer Edwidge Dandicat, which I shall discuss here next, explore diasporic experiences of exile and freedom juxtaposed with life in the terror of remaining in the homeland.

One of the major traumas of the modern diaspora is that of the sense of loss of identity, and the sense of alienation inherent within relocation and specifically with the “migrant condition”. In exploring these stories, the recent discussions in trauma studies shed light upon the predicament of the characters, since they stress the dichotomy between event and experience, how the original experience is translated into emotional trauma through the role of memory (LaCapra, “History”). Since this field of study originates in Holocaust studies, writers are also concerned to solidify the difference between perpetrators and victims, terrorists and the terrorised, inhuman atrocities and what may constitute legitimate retribution. They have highlighted a need to focus on various historical moments as well as projecting future outcomes. The field of trauma studies suggests that personal testimony may be recorded and validated in the face of loss or fragmentation of memory (a typical response to a traumatic event), denial, and the passage of time.

Dandicat bases her fiction on the premise of the ability of char-
acter to represent historical process. While not venturing as far as the Rushdie of *Midnight’s Children* in drawing parallels between individual and national history, nevertheless, her novels portray personal psyche as inextricably bound up with cultural consciousness. In the stories of *The Dew Breaker*, the various characters are all ultimately linked by past experience in the Haiti of President “Papa Doc” Duvalier. They struggle to come to terms with just how life can be lived and survived after physical and psychological damage. According to Rushdie, “the migrant suspects reality: having experienced several ways of being, he understands their illusory nature” (125). Here, the characters must confront their past through the collision of invented reality and remembered actuality. Their traumas of forced relocation are mirrored in the shock of having to revise memory, to live beneath the masks of invented identities. Individuals, even more so than nations, become imagined entities. They not only have to negotiate past trauma but also live with the continuing consequences of the violence of historical events. They must discard the wounds of memory and attempt to construct new bodies of self and other.

The stories delineate the struggle inherent in trying to live with the new self-identities that are created. For example, the first and pivotal story, “The Book of the Dead”, involves the consequences of a lost moral conviction of “innocent” victimhood, and the nostalgia for a past viewed as oppressed but worthy. Similarly, the protagonist’s lost belief in the father figure implies a deeper and metaphorical collapse of representations of patria, forcing a psychological reassessment of attachment to the lost homeland. Dandicat’s analysis of how trauma and pain together build a bridge between past and present is often represented in terms of the child-parent bond. In “Water Child”, the female protagonist is alienated from her family in Haiti and finds it impossible to reformulate a connection with them—not even being able to phone her parents for fear of the emotional wounds such a direct communication with the past may open for her. To mirror this predicament, the traumatic event rendered “unspeakable” through post-traumatic stress disorder, remains unstated in the text. Her inability to phone and speak to her parents in Haiti is paralleled in the panic and fear when, working as a nurse, she witnesses how a laringectomy renders a hospitalised American woman permanently speechless. Although frustrated in her ability to help, she recognises her life as mirrored in that of the forever-silenced patient—an epiphany that involves acknowledging her aborted child and lost lover—and she is at last able to make the call to Haiti to speak with her mother. Family ties again indicate the tensions of the unresolved anxious relationship between individual and their lost nation(ality) in the story “Seven”. In “The Funeral Singer”, a group of
Haitian women in New York struggle to acclimatise themselves to their new culture, but one of them cannot adapt, and feels she must return to the struggle in Haiti. She sings her own traditional funeral song to acknowledge that her decision is tantamount to suicide.

Traumatised by past events, the characters all seek a new mode of existence in which they can face reality, grieve for the past, and gain sufficient agency for survival, even while attempting to protect themselves from the past world of horror, loss and death. Dandicat’s characters are numb, stuck in a troubled state of liminality that does not, however, offer the opportunity for the new “border-crossings” that Homi Bhabha suggests in his concept of the Third Space. This “in-between state” of hybridity is characterised by a suspension of time, space and identity, and should by definition be a transformative space. While new identities are formulated and lived out, the memories of the past apparently disallow any psychological movement or resolution of past conflict. An aching nostalgia also resonates through Dandicat’s writing, an anguished sense of loss of the homeland that is both a chronic and untreatable malady.

In the final story, the diverse personal histories told in the previous text are given greater significance through explication of the original event that propelled their exiles. The father of the initial story “The Book of the Dead” is revealed in his true identity, that of a brutal and sadistic state torturer. The fact that he marries a woman whose brother, a priest, he has just brutally murdered in the gaol ironically exacerbates the inability to reconcile the personal and national knots of the past. Despite guessing the truth, Anne, his wife, stays with him, travelling with him to exile in the United States—where they become the parents of Ka (the narrator of the first story). Her endorsement of his new identity in America perpetuates the myth of his past, and the erasure of his true identity, and thus she is arguably implicated in his crimes. Even after twenty years, she lives in a state of dread, yet maintains the hope that “atonement, reparation, was possible and available for everyone” (242). The myth of their personal existence is mirrored in the father’s obsession with Egyptian mythology: his secret personal past in Haiti endorsed through that more ancient cult of death.

In Breath, Eyes, Memory, the oral story telling tradition, the weaving of a female mythology, is able to bind together three generations of women, who have been either physically or psychologically abused. Healing past trauma is possible through the stories being passed on from mother to child in the same genetic pattern that also maintains their alternative encoding of wisdom such as second sight. The oral narratives traditionally have “mother-and-daughter motifs to all the stories they told and all the songs they sang. It was something that was
essentially Haitian. Somehow, early on, our song makers and tale weavers had decided we were all daughters of this land” (Dandicat *Breath* 230). Against the background of escalating national violence, agency through recourse to the figure of the indigenous goddess as icon of female power, and other alternative modes of feminist discourse destabilise the power of patriarchal narratives. In reading Dandicat’s novels, however, a simplistic reductionism of male versus female (or masculine/feminine) power remains problematic, since violence, torture, and abuse and the resulting traumatised memory of experience are not gender-specific.

Yet, from the erasure of agency through trauma and the dislocations in physical location, the desire for growth away from the strictures of trauma towards a subjective and emotional completeness in these works shows how narrative is reflective of a human need for deriving meaning out of chaos, an ineluctable search for liberation of the mind and body, as well as implicating work of other theorists in the area of cosmopolitanism, and the notion of transnational ethics.

The works of postcolonial and diasporic authors such as D’Aguiar and Dandicat address problems of cultural conflict and political and economic imperialism, as well as implicating gendered violence—problems accessed through multiple layerings of memory, history, and imagination. Just as its remnant shards constitute the past, it is in these layers of thought and memory that sense must be made from incoherence. The gaps and aporias in memory experienced in trauma in fact have become a feature typical of the “postmodern” experience of incompleteness.

Yet significantly, in postcolonial terms, it is the gaps, the in-between spaces, that carry “the burden of the meaning of culture” (Bhabha 2). According to Martin Heidegger, the gap is the all-significant source of both art and the creative imagination, the space where the unmanifest wrestles to becomes manifest, between the “disclosure and concealment, between mysterious darkness of the unconscious body memory and the illumination to the light of the visible” (62). In the rift or gap lies the paradoxical and yet dynamic space of “invisible inner darkness and the illumination of visibility” (62). Moreover, contemporary psychologists inform us that “gap-filling is the central dynamic of mind” and, moreover, that this is identified primarily with the imagination. “Without imagination there could be no meaning”, stresses Brian Lancaster, “and without meaning there would be no mind” (187).

Memory—with which postcolonial theory and literature centrally concerns itself—involves the relationship between events, interconnections that intersect with the “I” of experiencing. Memory forges interconnectiveness of experience to create order, while the imagina-
tion uses insight to bridge the gaps in knowledge (Lancaster 188). It is through articulating the crossing, or reconciliation, of the abyss of violent (apparent) oppositions that these evocative novels speak so clearly to our generation of the need for such resolution—the bridging of gaps—and the imaginative forging of a new map of the territory of human existence beyond concepts of patria. An apparently more positive effect of migration and dislocation (for whatever reason) is “the creation of radically new types of human being: people who root themselves in ideas rather than places [...] people in whose deepest selves strange fusions occur” (Rushdie Imaginary Homelands 124). If so, in such “strange fusions” of imagination and memory, alternative realities must and will be envisioned. As writers, Dandicat and D’Aguiar are the harbingers of that change.

Works Cited


In *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997), Fred D’Aguiar engages with a central paradox of Caribbean history: searching for an inclusive identity, Caribbean writers and critics must look to history; and yet, often-times the only history offered is the skewed result of colonial power and economically based hierarchies. This ‘history’ is all that is left, and yet it reinforces the domination they want desperately to escape. For Caribbean literature then, any attempt to relate history must describe oppression even as it responds with a revision of resistance. The sea is equally problematic, repelling because of the abuse it has witnessed and alluring as the only tangible starting point for Caribbean peoples. D’Aguiar, a Guyanese black British poet, novelist, and critic, has interests in history and identity which inevitably lead him to the sea—for as Derek Walcott has argued the “sea is history”—and specifically to the slave ship. D’Aguiar describes this curiosity in his own words:

I have always been interested in the in-betweenness of a slave ship in the Atlantic for the slaves who have left home and are bound for a strange place. At sea they are able to think about what they have left and where they are heading. Water becomes a library for them. They have to read the current of the sea and match it with their memory, their will to remember, their will to live, the shock of their bodies in bondage. (qtd. in Frias 422)

Recuperating history by resisting the erasure of the sea, D’Aguiar explores the process of how ship-bound Africans are dominated by slavery even as they create avenues of survival. *Feeding the Ghosts* tells of the voyage of the *Zong*, a ship that transported stolen men and wom-
en from their African homes to the Jamaican platforms of slave auctions. D’Aguiar refuses to overlook the horrors of the massacre which reportedly occurred on the historic crossing of the Zong. On this historic voyage, disease threatened to decimate the stock of Africans upon whom investors’ profits depended. Rather than deliver a small crop, the Captain of the Zong decided to exploit an insurance policy that promised compensation for any loss assumed in an attempt to preserve the cargo. To this end, he ordered 132 living slaves thrown overboard. D’Aguiar’s novel is not only about remembering those who lost their lives on this passage by telling their stories; it is also about conflicting power. Through speaking, dancing and writing, an African slave woman named Mintah promotes alternative power structures even as she is unable finally to overthrow hegemonic power.

In giving a woman not only the will to resist but also the physical means to do so through her speech and writing, D’Aguiar revises the history of the Middle Passage even as he re-tells this story. In her study on “Women and Resistance: ‘Herstory’ in Contemporary Caribbean History,” Blanca G. Silvestrini examines not only traditional historiographies’ exclusion of women, but also establishes the fact that “women’s experiences were silenced from history by the very nature of the historical endeavor” (165). For D’Aguiar to re-see the history of the Middle Passage in terms of resistance, specifically through a woman’s struggle, is to offer a revision of Caribbean history itself. Silvestrini comments, “to tell women’s story, to place them at the centre and make sense of their experiences, means that we have to reconceptualize Caribbean History” (173). D’Aguiar does not record history that portrays a woman as a victim; rather, he offers an alternative history with a new reading of gender and power relationships.

Through his characterization of Mintah, D’Aguiar explores the ways in which the African and European worlds collide in the space of a slave ship on the Atlantic. This collusion represents what Mary Louise Pratt has called the “contact zone,” a term she uses to describe “the social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination—like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths” (4). In the contact zone, subordinated cultures challenge the authority of dominant cultures by manipulating the very tools used to dominate them; their resistance is performed by redefining and co-opting the manner in which they are oppressed. Rather than privileging white, hegemonic power, he inserts a woman’s resistance and explores the resulting clash with authority and collapse of hierarchy. Mintah’s rebellion is precisely such a manipulation of the colonial power over language, movement and even life. Sarah Appleton Aguiar’s “bitch” discourse, in which she
Lucayos outlines the character traits that exemplify a woman who resists oppression, reveals the specific choices Mintah must make, “either consciously or subconsciously, to reject the traditional roles open to her and to possess power, a power that is always presupposed to have been usurped from the male sphere” (Aguiar 98). Approaching Feeding the Ghosts through Aguiar’s bitch theory allows us to more fully understand how Mintah’s actions affect not only her individual situation, but also the ramifications of her resistance on her community. Mintah resists the oppression of this contact zone by employing the tools used by her oppressors to dominate the slaves on the Zong. Rejecting traditional roles for slave women, she embodies Aguiar’s bitch by usurping power from the male sphere. To this end, Mintah uses the power of the spoken word to reclaim her identity and undermine her abusers. At times her resistance is less explicit, for she also rebels against her role as feminine performer and bearer of children when she dances for the captain. While this dance has private ramifications for Mintah, her resistance also involves spiritual aspects which have communal results. Using Hélène Christol’s foundation of the “conventional fantastic story” in African culture, I will explore Mintah as a representative African character whose affect on her community is significant to D’Aguiar’s revision of history (166). A transformed Mintah thus revises her present situation of defeat by creating a spiritual realm—inaccessible to her oppressors—from which she draws hope.

D’Aguiar’s portrayal of Mintah’s challenge to the accepted power structure is complicated by his ambiguity in the final portions of the text. Although Mintah certainly resists the traditional ways in which women are dominated and objectified, it is not clear if the traditional power hierarchy ultimately stands or if she has successfully dealt it a mortal blow. Her rebellion is just that; she lacks the agency to create a revolution. When her country establishes and celebrates their emancipation, Mintah dies in a consuming fire—the same image used by her oppressors to control and abuse her. This ambiguity need not disconcert us, for many working in and producing Caribbean literature are drawn to the sea as the place in which they were first abused even as they also developed their awareness of how they might survive their new realities.2 The history of the Middle Passage, then, is approached hesitantly and portrayed ambiguously in Caribbean literature. The lack of closure surrounding the history of resistance in the sea does not detract, however, from its compelling power as both a common place of beginning and a site of countless horrors and death.

In D’Aguiar’s text, the nature of slavery on the Zong removed all agency from the Africans bound by hands and feet in the dim interiors of the ship’s holds. Uprooted men and women were kept in
chains, suffocating and starving in the bottom of a ship rolling over the ocean’s waves. In these holds they were forced to lay in the squalor of their own urine and excrement, unable to lift their heads for a simple breath of fresh air. Historical accounts reveal little of the experience from the perspective of the enslaved, and yet certain attempts at resistance were common in similar passages. In her article, “The Slave Ship Dance” Geneviève Fabre asserts that “codes of silence” were adopted among Africans as an “answer to the humiliations suffered, alternating with moments of extreme vocal expression and shrieks of grief” (39). Indeed, the women onboard the Zong adopted this code by crying “silently,” helping one another “silence those tears” (Fabre 76). In contrast to this silence is the verbal authority established among the crew. True to the power structure on board any ship, the words of the Captain and Kelsal, his white first mate, translate into immediate action. Captain Cunningham, who is also anglo, is a man who wields an unthreatened authority, and yet this power disintegrates as he chooses to assume control over life and death based on the bottom line. Slaves below deck, on the other hand, gain a form of power by refusing such speech.

In contrast to this strategy of silence, Mintah undermines the traditional power structure and establishes her own agency through the sound of her voice. From her first word, Mintah asserts her ability to disrupt. Accustomed to ignoring the “howls, moans, cries, calls and implorings in indecipherable tongues [which] assailed [his] ears” in the slave holds, Kelsal is insensitive to the needs of those enslaved (D’Aguiar 19). Mintah thrusts a new reality into the first mate’s consciousness by screaming his name in his own tongue: “Only what he heard next could have kept him below decks a moment longer. He froze. ‘Kelsal!’” (D’Aguiar 20-21). Rather than believe that such assertiveness could come from a source outside of himself, Kelsal thinks he must be “hearing things” (D’Aguiar 21). Nevertheless, Mintah possesses the power to arrest his actions by uttering one word. Despite his disbelief, he is convinced that a competing source of authority now exists.

Kelsal spends the rest of the voyage resisting this verbal authority, even as this alternative source of power undermines the existing structure in which he functions. As Mintah’s power persists and takes on different forms, the ship’s hierarchy is severely threatened. When Kelsal first beats her for her speech, it is clear that from now on, the men will question all authority: “But the faces of the men around him, including the trustworthy second mate’s, appeared to take little or no pleasure in the exercise” (D’Aguiar 33). This independence is soon asserted on every level, for Kelsal becomes the spokesperson for the crew in telling the Captain that, “all of us...will have nothing further to do with this treatment of the sick” (101). This claim directly rejects the
Captain's previous orders. The hierarchy is further destroyed when the boatswain refuses to fall in line with his first mate and instead remains loyal to the Captain. This dissension on every level is felt by the Captain, as he observes that “every order issued by him in the last day or so seemed to necessitate lengthy debate” (98). The crew of the *Zong* experiences the consequences of an undermined power structure on every level. Mintah’s resistance is most effective because she utilizes her voice to challenge the crew, who has used the power of the spoken word to enslave her. She manipulates the system they put in place, attempting to level the ground between the forces of this contact zone by undermining their spoken power with her voice. Her verbal assertiveness is significant because she is beating them at their own game.

Mintah’s challenge not only pervades the authority of the Captain and first mate, she threatens the very basis of Kelsal’s identity. Having gained the position of first mate, Kelsal is someone to whom the crew “deferred,” for he “represented the thoughts and feelings of the rest of the crew” (D’Aguiar 12). Mintah’s voice, however, has the power to destroy his self-possession. After she speaks his name with the moral authority of entitlement, Kelsal loses all personal agency:

> He simply mimicked the antics and sounds of everyone around him as they responded to the Captain while he stared at Mintah, putting all of his energy into ransacking his past to see if he could produce an image from it that approximated to the young woman facing him. (D’Aguiar 30)

Kelsal cannot articulate his identity in the face of this powerful African woman. Mintah calls his name because she has known him as a human in need, when he was wounded in the Christian settlement in which she once lived. This shared past leads her to expect him to respond to the mass murder on the ship by recognizing the humanity of those enslaved. Kelsal’s cruel response to her claim on his compassion effectually removes all that distinguishes him from the rest of the crew. After beating her, he is no longer distinct, but only a mirror of the mass. He does not control his actions, and cannot make any choice for himself.

Kelsal’s only thoughts now originate in reaction to Mintah’s being. Indeed, she soon dominates his mind as he is consumed with thoughts of her: “He thought of Mintah’s foul mouth. Spit from it in his face like the sea. Her words running around in his head, a perpetual sea-sound. His name on her lips, Kelsal, another word for sea, for spit. What he was doing had to stop” (D’Aguiar 127). Her domination of his mind becomes indistinguishable from the sea and from her spit. While
his crew continues to throw Africans overboard, Kelsal is effectively drowning in Mintah’s words; he cannot escape her. When Mintah later begs him to end her life, she disrupts the structure of things even more. She orders Kelsal to throw her overboard, transforming his former exhibition of cruelty into an act of mercy. She is again attempting to disrupt and change the power structure of this contact zone, using Kelsal’s own cruel action to challenge his sense of himself. Mintah’s claim on his humanity controls him, forcing Kelsal to justify his former behavior. His thoughts are narrated, “He had done what he had done to her because he wanted to be Kelsal again, not the Kelsal she had summoned when she called his name, but the first mate of the Zong” (131). Kelsal’s identity is subverted; although he knows who he wants to be, he cannot affirm which “Kelsal” he is to be. His psyche is so disturbed that he cannot even articulate “what he had done to her.” As Mintah continues to speak, she strengthens her grip on Kelsal; he becomes inarticulate as she affirms her own agency.

Even when her rebellion is later thwarted, Mintah continues to establish an alternate power system by asserting her humanity in a language Kelsal and the crew understand. She gives other victims agency by redefining the consequences of their death and providing them a way to speak resistance:

“Your name! What is your name?” Mintah shouted in the three languages she knew and raised herself up to her knees.

“Why? How will it save me?” The woman’s grip was loosened by the struggle and by another man beating her arms with his club.

“I will remember you! Others will remember you!”

... “I am Ama!” (126)

Mintah’s mastery of many languages literally raises her to her knees as she speaks hope into Ama’s moment of death. Mintah no longer claims the desire to change the physical circumstances of their shared trial; rather, she demonstrates her ability to infuse death with life—a forgotten burial with shared remembrance. There is hope in Ama’s victorious assertion: “I am Ama!” In this way, Mintah uses language to support and solidify the identities of those losing their lives, even as her words undermine those speaking in authority over her.

Mintah does not simply exhibit verbal agency, but also creates power through physical movement in her sacred dance of dominion. Having been stolen from their homes, families and communities, Africans on slave ships were dominated in every possible way.
Although all Africans were subject to horrid conditions, women were violated in irreversible ways. Crews of men, relationally and physically starved, did not hesitate to slake their lust on African women who had no tools of resistance at their disposal. Despite this reality, D’Aguiar implies rather than describes rape, perhaps because he is not primarily interested in that spectacle of abuse but rather in the ways in which the Africans resist and ultimately recover from such abuse.

To this end, D’Aguiar explores the situation common to ships of the Middle Passage in which men force enslaved women to dance. This form of abuse is particularly cruel for African women who use dance in order to supplicate their gods. Fabre offers a brief history of this type of worship:

In the cults honoring the gods or the ancestors, dance was a way of mediating between the godly and the human, the living and the dead. Deities were praised, called upon through a dance designed to invoke special features, properties, or abilities. Dance was thus used to solicit intercession, to thwart wrath or punishment that human action might have incurred, to flatter, or to appease. (33)

Dance is therefore a sacred ritual that provides a place of communion and intimacy with gods. Due to the spiritual roots of dance for African women, compulsory dance commanded by slavers was a psychically devastating form of subjection. Forcing a woman to dance makes it clear that she belongs to another, physically and even spiritually; such a command typically removes from an African woman what is perhaps her last form of privacy or self-ownership. She now understands that she exists to offer her entire being to the orders and even whims of white men. Because of this unspoken understanding, the men use compulsory dance strategically to clarify the structure of power in which their new property now functions.

D’Aguiar explores this display of power on the Zong. Rather than simply relate Mintah’s compliance with Captain Cunningham’s order to dance, the narrator provides insight into her thoughts for the first time in the novel. Having learned the fact that she had lived in the Danish mission, the crew is “preoccupied with what she had said” (D’Aguiar 31). Due to her contact with European missionaries, Mintah’s claims on morality have the same basis as “civilized” moral codes, and thus her moral challenge to these murders finds reluctantly receptive hearers. Mintah’s history amounts to a threat to the authority structure of the ship. The crew thinks of the stolen Africans as little better than animals, but they now know that,
[Mintah] was not like the other slaves. Her prolonged contact with missionaries amounted to a familiarity with whites...She would have gained an education, would be able to read and write, when most of them could barely sign their names. She would have learned about the kind of world they came from. All of which took the place of the usual fear of whites and resulted in a slave who was difficult to subjugate. (D'Aguiar 31)

Aware of his crew's insecurity, the Captain issues a uniquely crushing order: “Dance for us, Mintah. Dance” (30). Phrased as an invitation, the Captain's order is clearly an imperative, for he “produced a whip and lashed at Mintah's feet” (D'Aguiar 30). As the crew joins in with clapping, it appears that she is entertaining them, but for many African women this dance serves as an initiation into their new lives in which they must perpetually “perform” their blackness. The crew wants to be instantly gratified, and they expect Mintah to embody their notions of African femininity in her performance.

Initially, Mintah's dancing is simply an instinctive result of the combination of the Captain's command and his whip. However, she infuses her position of pure subjectivity with her agency, again finding a way to resist the domination of the crew. Fabre helps us anticipate such a move on Mintah's part, arguing that,

If the dancing of the slave involved many strategies and much scheming on the part of the slavers, one may surmise that the captives responded with equally elaborate devices to develop—secretly but purposefully—a form of dancing that could escape control and manipulation. (37)

D'Aguiar clarifies that Mintah embodies this resistance when she “decided to dance the death of fertility dance” (31). The narration becomes heavy handed here: “No doubt they would see it as her willingness to obey their every whim, but she needed to dance this particular dance” (31). Knowing that any explicit challenge to authority is immediately thwarted and punished, Mintah obeys the Captain and entertains the crew, while accomplishing her own goals, as well. She is now able, “to transfer the pain of the whip around her legs to that of her womb. To placate the fertility god. To touch imaginary soil with the balls of her foot,” and to “be cleansed by the rain, by water in its purest form” (D'Aguiar 31-32). The notion of the contact zone is helpful here because it emphasizes Mintah's choice to resist not by refusing to obey,
but by taking the orders of the dominant captain and using them to undermine him, improving her own position of subordination. Mintah thus turns her point of complete subjection into a moment of utter freedom. By privileging her own thoughts, the narrator reveals that rather than performing for them, they now perform for her; “Mintah replaced the crew’s clapping with drums” (32). In this way she continues to successfully resist her place at the bottom of this hierarchy of power.

Her dance is significant not only in the immediate release it offers her, but even more in the result of her performance. Mintah chooses the “death of fertility” dance, and with the cessation of her movement she not only stops the show, but also ends the procreative function of her womb (D’Aguiar 31). By seeming to comply with Captain Cunningham, Mintah successfully costs her future owner thousands of dollars. For every thousand Africans who started the Middle Passage, only hundreds made it to the Americas alive (Wright 14). Because of the uncertainty of availability for new slaves to work on plantations, many owners depended on their female slaves to bear new slaves quickly. Mintah’s greater act of rebellion, then, is her determination to subvert the compliant role of female slaves even as she appears to comply with the Captain’s orders. The result of her fertility dance ensures that she will never be an unwilling promoter of the system of slavery.

While her dance is a public display of private resistance, Mintah soon represents hope for her community of slaves when she creates an avenue for spiritual resistance through her resurrection from the sea. Having been determined an instigator of trouble and an unredeemable rebel, Mintah causes chaos as the crew attempts to throw her into the sea. D’Aguiar slows down the pulse of his text here, listing each quadrant of her body that disappears, even down to “the hand still gripping a clump of Kelsal’s long auburn hair, and then Mintah was gone” (49). And yet Mintah’s resistance does not end with her disappearance; instead, by climbing back on the ship, she continues to challenge the existing power structures even in spiritual and psychic realms.

Defying the physical reality witnessed by others, she gains a new form of power; she becomes a being with authority over death. Having overcome her physical boundaries in climbing back on board, Mintah now re-establishes them on her own terms. It is at this point that her rebellion outgrows her personal endeavor, gaining significance for her fellow Africans as she comes to represent a spiritual force. Her survival embodies the collective dream of the African women: “They shared a recurring dream in which dignity and pride were resurrected from those depths, salvaged and restored” (D’Aguiar 76). Despite the reality that hundreds of slaves were abused and killed on the Zong, D’Aguiar
provides this counter narrative in which spiritual and physical realms combine in order to provide a form of resistance to this all encompassing authority.

In creating a spiritual element in Mintah that is immediately recognized by her fellow slaves, D’Aguiar introduces aspects of well-established African spirituality. Establishing the “presence of a hysterical girl who can conjure up the spirits,” in her article, “The African American Concept of the Fantastic as Middle Passage,” Helene Christol comments that, “the fantastic is thus a crucial element in challenging existing notions of reality, subverting the visions channeled by dominant cultures and provoking action to change both that vision and reality” (166, 172). In recognizing Mintah as a spiritual being, the Africans find and claim hope that the contact zone in which they find themselves is not limited to the parameters set by their oppressors. Mintah thus establishes another form of resistance by escaping the death meant for her and literally overcoming the physical oppression placed upon her. They have been dominated physically, but with Mintah’s reemergence, it is clear that their reality contains different elements, enabling them to challenge the power structure of which they are a part. D’Aguiar models Christol’s claim that “the intervention of the fantastic thus frees the community and the characters...and becomes a necessary instrument in the healing of personal and collective wounds” (170). Mintah thus introduces this “fantastic” element, essentially defining for herself the grounds upon which she can resist the power oppressing her. Part of the inferior culture, Mintah redraws the lines within which this contact zone occurs.

Mintah’s reception among the Africans in the hold makes it clear that she is now a spiritual being sent to give them hope on several levels. In fact, the scene of her resurrection is infused with otherworldly elements. As she climbs the rope the text reads, “‘Let go, Mintah!’ She heard the voice above the wind and the rain and the sea, above all the flames, inside her body and out” (54). It is clear here that when she comes out of the water, beating death, her spiritual reality is now more important than her physical surroundings. Having established her spiritual significance, D’Aguiar demonstrates Mintah’s ability to elicit an immediate spiritual response among her fellow slaves. Mintah “crept into the men’s section of the slave hold with the index finger of her right hand over her lips. There were shrieks and open mouths and sudden intakes of breath” (D’Aguiar 87). The instinctive nature of their response proves their recognition of Mintah as a spiritual being. Indeed, the men act on this belief as they, “touched her for some of her magic to rub off on them and to check that she wasn’t an apparition” (D’Aguiar 88). As other slaves accept Mintah as their spiritual inspira-
tion, it is important to note that Mintah is simultaneously recreating herself. While D'Aguiar revises this history of the Zong, Mintah redefines her role as a woman in a patriarchal system.

In fact, Fred D'Aguiar not only presents Mintah as a ghost of sorts; she also comes to represent what Sarah Aguiar calls, “a bitch.” Sarah Aguiar traces the way in which the bitch resists traditional feminine roles:

Because of her repudiation of the traditional, patriarchally defined feminine role, because she won’t play ‘nice’ with the boys, the bitch is exiled from the patriarchal playground. Yet, in that denouncement, the bitch has found a space of her own. (32)

Since speaking Kelsal’s name, Mintah has refused to play by the white, European man’s rules. Mintah creates a space in which she has the agency to choose what roles she will assume or ignore. She will not remain the inferior element of this contact zone, but will challenge this unequal relationship of power by creating her own space outside the parameters set for her. Aguiar’s conception is further useful in that the bitch most often resurrects herself, after which she “accepts responsibility for the whole self, [and] is rewarded with knowledge and power” (135). Her authority primarily comes from her refusal to reside in a position of inferiority and helplessness in relation to the colonial patriarchy while her knowledge emerges as she “widens the parameters of self, redefining who she is” (Aguiar 135). Mintah’s new self-knowledge and power are seen following her resurrection from the sea, when she feels her body again after being numb. Her rebirth is clear: she is consumed with laughter, begins to eat and write, and engages in a relationship with Simon. Mintah is the self-made bitch who finds the agency to challenge the system in which she is trapped.

The bitch is not just liberated in herself; she often has positive affects on the community of which she is a member. Although the text confesses that some women are afraid of Mintah’s rebellion and have learned “what not to do” by watching her, most of her community is encouraged when she re-emerges as spirit, goddess and matriarch (D’Aguiar 76). The women strive to feel “her head, her face [and] her body,” as they listen to her (D’Aguiar 89). It is as if they will be healed by her words and touch. Indeed, Mintah’s presence infuses the hold with hope and the promise of redemption. When the boy who witnesses her being thrown overboard sees her again, his reaction reflects a salvation experience: He “told the other children that they would be saved by her”...and he “patted other children on the back who were older than himself. His face shown with conviction” (D’Aguiar 105).
time in her presence has a tangible effect on the boy. His face bears the
mark of Mintah's afterglow just as Moses' face shown after having been
in the presence of God. Mintah empowers the boy to become a leader
to the other children as he confidently encourages them.

Other African slaves previously without hope are similarly trans-
formed by her resurrection. D’Aguiar reveals the spiritual element in
their reaction: “To the women, talking among themselves, Mintah’s re-
appearance was nothing short of a miracle. The gods were present in
her to watch over them” (93). Not only does her presence lead them to
spiritual experiences, but they begin to worship her, clapping and sing-
ing praises to her name (D’Aguiar 93). In this way, D’Aguiar makes it
clear that her very presence creates a new space for resistance. Her re-
turn reminds them that they are bound physically but free to hope and
worship on a spiritual level. For instance, slaves are still thrown over-
board, but they go to their deaths screaming, “Mintah!”, as if confident
that the power of her name might save them (D’Aguiar 99). Mintah's
return not only elicits a response infused with hope, she is now regard-
ed as a goddess/savior. Ironically, although they take hope in this new
path to freedom, their circumstances do not change. D’Aguiar subtly
reminds us that these women “vanish over the side” of the ship even
though they scream her name (93). Is Mintah's act of resistance valid
in challenging the boundaries of this oppression, or does her rebellion
simply enforce the degree of abuse and hopelessness slaves must suf-
fer? In order to address this question we must investigate the implica-
tions of the end of D’Aguiar’s text.

Despite the significant ways in which Mintah challenges the
power structures on the Zong, her subsequent life on land undermines
the lasting effects of her resistance. Following her resurrection, Mintah
finds peace in her decision to record her story: “I go to sleep knowing
I have to write everything that happens to me and to everyone around
me. Is that why I sleep so deep? Knowing I’ve found a way to get what
I see on this ship out of me?” (D’Aguiar 191). D’Aguiar explicitly recog-
nizes the importance of Mintah using the language of the slavers—Eng-
lish—to overthrow their hegemony. Despite her subversive behavior in
this contact zone, however, her words have little impact. The submis-
sion of her journal into court only confirms her status as insignificant
property; she is without consequence. Thus, her resistance only further
illuminates the depth of her objectivity.

After serving as a slave in Maryland, Mintah purchases her own
freedom and moves south to Jamaica. Working to buy herself back is
yet another way in which she challenges the basis of the unequal power
structure in this contact zone: she earns enough capital, using the he-
gemonic economy to free herself. Mintah throws off the mantle of op-
pression under which she struggled, and yet she is still dominated by the reality of her life on the Zong. Her former existence pervades her present reality:

I call my house my hold. It is crowded with pieces of wood. The shape of each piece is pulled from the sea of my mind and has been shaped by water, with water’s contours. People say they see a figure of some kind, man, woman, or child reaching up out of the depths. (208)

D’Aguiar’s text is purposefully ambiguous—as is Mintah’s own perception of herself. Although she has escaped the hegemonic power on the surface, the present is dominated by her history in the sea.

D’Aguiar ends _Feeding the Ghosts_ with similar ambiguity. Mintah claims the “sea no longer haunted her” (224) and argues that the Zong “was in that sea and we were in it and that would be for an eternity without beginning or end” (229). She recognizes that her “detailed knowledge” of names and of “who did what to whom”, “has not made an iota of difference to history or to the sea” (229) while also claiming “the past is laid to rest when it is told” (D’Aguiar 230). Rather than ending her life with memories of survival that offer her contentment, Mintah is haunted by delusional visions of her significance; she has not made a difference. Although he appears to be ambiguous in Mintah’s sense of freedom and closure, D’Aguiar is painfully clear that no amount of resistance can end oppression. For instance, although Jamaica celebrates its independence at the end of the text, D’Aguiar gives credit for this to the traditional possessors of power: “The slave owners had to grow tired of the responsibility of plantations” (205). The slavers chose to give up on Jamaica. Jamaica took nothing from these owners.

Despite her great effort to overcome the hierarchy which dominated her, D’Aguiar’s portrayal of Mintah’s death is clearly reminiscent of her abuse onboard the Zong. As part of her punishment for leading and instigating the short-lived rebellion on the ship, the officers ordered “pepper to be daubed on [her] eyes” and “more pepper between [her] legs and pushed up into [her body]” (D’Aguiar 215). When remembering this, Mintah says, “Fire was thrown into me. Tears scalded my face. The flames crawled behind my eyes and into my skull. Fire entered my body” (D’Aguiar 215). It is no mistake that when Mintah dies at the end of the text, D’Aguiar uses the same language: “Heat filled her hands. Heat undressed her. Fire pushed her to her knees. She opened her mouth for air and ate fire. It stung like the time she had drunk the sea. The flames toppled her, laid her flat and covered her” (226). This highly sexualized language reveals the final subjection Mintah suffers.
She does not overturn the power structure she spends her adult life resisting; indeed, she does not even survive it. She ends her life as a free woman, yet raped and killed by the same force slavers used to subdue her a lifetime ago. It is here that D’Aguiar finally reveals his comment on the history of the Middle Passage: no amount of agency can resist its grasp. In fact, Mintah’s attempts at resistance ultimately work to reinforce the depth of her oppression. Her insignificant account of witness counters D’Aguiar’s own project, in which he revises history by giving his pen to a woman for a time. D’Aguiar is, in effect, issuing “an invitation, a challenge to shift paradigms, to learn from women's voices as affirmative actors in history, rather than as underprivileged dependent others” (Silvestrini 173). Although Mintah’s history might be ignored, D’Aguiar clearly promotes the value of retelling a narrative in order to find release from a destructive past. This history only destroys, and yet it must be remembered and retold in order to be released. Moments of hope pervade this text and must therefore be recognized as D’Aguiar’s own attempt to revise a history of destruction. For D’Aguiar, the sea must be revisited so that a new history can be told. This project of revising Caribbean history cannot be completed by erasing or ignoring the lost identities of those abused; instead, this shared history must be infused with hope as new paradigms are offered. These new visions empower us to see history not as an erasure of identity, but as a potential legacy of effective resistance which can lead to a new reality not just for an individual, but for a community.

**Notes**

1 D’Aguiar is not the first to emphasize this cruelty, for J.M.W. Turner’s early Nineteenth Century painting was celebrated for its purity, even as the foreground of the painting featured the violence of drowning slaves. David Dabydeen published “Turner” in 2002, a collection of poems in which he recreates life and death on the ship displayed in Turner’s painting (Dabydeen, David. *Turner: New and Selected Poems*. Leeds: Peepal Tree Press Ltd., 2002.). Sarah Fulford, in her “David Dabydeen and Turner’s Sublime Aesthetic,” points out that Dabydeen emphasizes Turner’s “morbid fascination with the power of inarticulate suffering and the infliction of pain” (20).

2 The sea figures predominately in much of Caribbean literature. See Derek Walcott’s “The Sea Is History” in *The Star Apple Kingdom* for instances of the ocean and sea figuring as a living, keeper of history. In “The Open Boat,” Wilson Harris writes of the wasted lives of those lost at sea: “The torment of those who never escaped it: straight from the belly of the slave ship into the violent belly of the ocean depths they went. But their ordeal did not die; it quickened into this continuous/ discontinuous thing” (7). Similarly, Edward Brathwaite, in “Caliban,” writes “eyes / shut tight / and the whip light / crawl- / ing round this ship where his free- / dom drown / down / down / down / to the is- / land
Lucayos town” (192-193). David Dabydeen, in his Turner collection of poems, portrays death in the sea: “no noise / Comes from my mouth, no lamentation / As I fall towards the sea, my breath held / In shock until the waters quell me. / Struggle come only after death” (25). Critic and poet Mark A. McWatt claims that the sea “becomes an important paradigm for dealing with the collective amnesia of the black diaspora; it speaks of the necessity to enter the void of history (the depths of the sea), not with the attitude of a people already defeated” “but with a kind of creative audacity that will supply the gaps with new inventions” (9). Jerome S. Wynter argues that “When one’s history is nebulous and shifting, it means that there are enormous possibilities for meaning making” (6).

3 Fabre writes of “codes of silence” “alternating with moments of extreme vocal expression and shrieks of grief” as a common form of resistance on board ships (39).

4 In “The Slave Ship Dance,” Fabre writes that slavers often used the dance to manipulate, control and subdue newly acquired slaves.

5 I borrow Judith Butler’s notion of the performative nature of gender and identity, for these slavers want their slaves to perform the expectations of blackness that they have developed in their limited interaction. See Butler, Judith. Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. London: Routledge, 1990.

6 See Exodus 34:29-30, “[Moses’] face was radiant because he had spoken with the Lord.”

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Columbus from his after-deck watched heights he hoped for, rocks he dreamed, rise solid from my simple water

Parrots screamed. Soon he would touch our land, his charted mind’s desire. The blue sky blessed the morning with its fire

Now he was sure he heard soft voices mocking in the leaves what did this journey mean, this new world mean: discovery? Or a return to terrors he had sailed from, known before?

Edward Braithwaite “Discoverer”

But we were peaceful then Child-like in the yellow dawn of our innocence Olive Senior “Meditation on Yellow”

The sea journey is the common experience which links the founders of the New World societies of the Caribbean. Recharting waters traversed by the region’s indigenous inhabitants - slave traders, seamen, adventurers, explorers, merchants, missionaries, the enslaved and indentured braved swelling oceans as they sailed away from relatively settled, homogenous societies into what Wilson Harris terms the “happy catastrophe” of cultural confrontation which gave birth to the
New World societies of the Caribbean. This melee of people groups, cultures and value systems have been yoked into a viable social order, against the background of oppressive and unjust social systems of slavery, indentureship, and other migrations. The sea journey has had pivotal actual and metaphorical significance for these islands’ inhabitants, since Columbus, that intrepid explorer, undertook his topsy turvy endeavor of sailing west to reach east.

The journey to the New World haunts Caribbean writers who confront pressing contemporary social issues with the ongoing imperative to craft originary narratives. The sea passage refuses to be relegated to a historical time past, taking on instead the character of a haunting, collective trauma which must be repeatedly recounted as the writers of all ethnicities grapple with the legacy of the peoples, cultures, ideologies, institutions, and material objects which came. Notwithstanding the inexorable and creative admixtures which have since resulted, the current material circumstances of a cross section of the respective people groups bear direct relation to their beginnings.

The racist ideologies of white supremacy and the cultural and mental inferiority of the other undergirded the largest enforced labour movements in recorded human history - the transatlantic slave trade and the only minimally less violating indentureship schemes. Many permutations later these ideologies lurk within the collective consciousness to accord social privilege and conversely to retard the progress of countless. The suffering endured on the journey is a significant factor in contemporary contestation over rights and belonging, including access to symbolic capital and national emblems. For, the argument goes, shouldn’t the State extend greater patronage to those who endured greater hardship in the Middle Passage. The journey haunts centuries later because until recently, it proved too grim to recount. In Lakshmi Persaud’s Butterfly in the Wind, (1990) the tongues of the aged one are loosened to tell the horror of journey only when the protagonist prepares to board a ship bound for Ireland – her passport to social upliftment through tertiary education. The successful journey redeems the shaming one and lifts the shrouds of silence.

Narratives of journey are sites at which we lay bare the weeping wounds of history. This paper explores the historical specificity of the slave journey for clues as to its relational dynamic, to demonstrate the politics of slavery and its traumatizing legacy. It illuminates the slave trade’s pivotal location in the formation of Western modernity. On the most basic level, many prominent material markers of Western civilization - as diverse as the Industrial Revolution and the Mansfield Parks of England - were constructed on the backs of enslaved Africans and their descendents. More significantly as argued by Cornel West, the
transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans is located at the paradoxical ideological cross roads of Western modernity:

The Dantesque journeys are the ignoble origins of Western modernity and the criminal foundations of American Democracy. African slavery sits at the center of the grand epoch of equality, liberty and fraternity, a centre often concealed by modern myths of progress and liberation. And black doings and sufferings remain burdened by the unspeakable memories of the Middle Passage – the chamber of horrors enacted on slave ships. (West 8)

If we read the ship as Gilroy envisions - a border crossing, transnational, microsystem of linguistic and political hybridity, which is a pivotal symbol of Western modernity (12), then the slave ship on which the terms of African European encounter were brutally enforced, in the interest of transforming free men into enslavers and enslaved, becomes a key signifier of the complex interface of cultural and political ideologies.

This analysis zeroes in on fictional representations of the journey of The British Slave ship Zong which was bound from West Africa to Jamaica in September 1781, when poor navigation lengthened the journey. This coupled with excessive overcrowding contributed to the outbreak of disease which claimed the lives of 60 slaves and seven crew members. By November 1781, Captain Luke Collingwood in an effort to hedge further losses used the opportunity of an approaching storm to dump 133 slaves in the ocean in order to benefit from insurance which would recompense for slaves lost at sea, but not for those who succumbed to disease. This was not an isolated event. Mortality rates on slave ships were extremely high such that these vessels became floating sarcophaguses reeking of waste and death, which sharks tracked through the oceans lured by the promise of a steady diet of human flesh.

The Zong atrocity provided grist for the mills of abolitionists on both sides of the Atlantic. Ironically greed was once again the driving impulse which propelled this case into the public domain. The judicial proceedings which ensued (Gregson vs Gilbert, March 1783) hinged on whether the Liverpool merchants who funded the enterprise were entitled to collect insurance at the rate of 30 pounds per head for their property which could be disposed of at will, or whether they had mismanaged the cargo. The ship’s owners argued that the Zong incident was simply a case of disposition of “chattels and goods”. The lower court ruled in favour of the ship’s owners. The underwriters appealed
and with the support of fervent abolitionists arrived at a decision that although disposing of the slaves was akin to disposing of horses, it was unnecessary to throw the chattel overboard since there were sufficient provisions for their care. A critique of fictional evocations of this infamous historical event, yields insight into the relationship between narrative and history, rememory, testimony and survival. It identifies the journey as a transitional, liminal passage with its common burden of violation, physical and psychic loss, and muted potentiality.

I adopt for this reading the filters of trauma theory as it grapples with issues of history and memory. Trauma with its heavily symptomatic aftermath looks into the past for root causes of contemporary disease and social dislocation. Its theorists have been concerned with two issues in the correlation between history and narrative. Even for historians, the essential issue in writing the past is not the fact or the truth of the event. Dominic LaCapra argues: “Truth claims are neither the only nor always the most important consideration in art and its analysis.... the interaction or mutually interrogative relation between history and art (including fiction) is more complicated than is suggested by either an identity or a binary opposition between the two” (LaCapra 15). Of greater significance is the politics of the ideological stance adopted by the historians as they select the details to recount their picture of the past. LaCapra after Ankersimt terms these pictures of the past “narrative substances” which are essentially “fictional and politically or ideologically motivated”. Alternately LaCapra after White, terms the pictures of the past “prefigurative tropes and meaning endowing projective narrative structures.” (LaCapra 10). Fiction released from the imperative of pursuing dates and times of historical events delves into these tropes to arrive at submerged realities that would otherwise be lost to human knowledge. Creative writers mining history for these projective narrative structures clothe the gaps and erasures of this experience with groping for the meanings of the half which has never yet been told. The incapacity to fully articulate, is as heavily infused with meaning as that half, which finds its way into some measure of uneasy articulation.

This was the point of departure for the poet, novelist and playwright Fred D’Aguiar, born in London in 1960 to Guyanese parents, who testifies of his chance encounter with the Zong exhibit in the Liverpool Maritime Museum:

The story left me with a feeling of deep depression and a desire to know more than the few facts conveyed...In the ship’s log, it said one person climbed back on board without saying who it was. So I thought I’d make it a woman and
once I’d done that it was hard just to make it a short story. I had to deal with what kind of journey a woman would have, and what if she survived, what if she got her freedom and other questions that came up that made it into a novel. It was a piece of history that then grew out of an absence of facts about it. (*Anthurium* 2.1)

Fred D’Aguiar’s *Feeding the Ghosts*, rooted in social realism interrogates the bedrock ethical, judicial and economic systems which undergirded the enterprise of the Indies. D’Aguiar grounds the lived experience aboard the slave ship within a range of contradictory philosophical and moral discourses and world views, which governed the trade in human flesh. The social hierarchy of the ship is a microcosm of the broader society, with its intersecting complex of racial, ethical and class relations. For the Captain, the bottom line remains the disposal of property for the sake of monetary advantage. The first mate struggles between his conscience, blind obedience to the captain’s authority and the compelling call emanating from a cross section of the crew to intervene on their behalf, in order to constrain the Captain’s murderous intent and actions. Still other crew members vacillate between raw greed to multiply their share of the profit of the enterprise by destroying chattel, and the sneaking suspicion of the shared humanity with the debased African. Looming above all is their evil institutional systemic which buttresses - the merchandizing, insurance, and judicial conventions all of which carry their own power to craft human motivation and action. The fundamental issue hinges on the energy it takes to maintain the illusion that the slaves are after all not human but chattel to be disposed of at the owner’s will. The conundrum is, if perchance, they are human, then to treat them as chattel and throw sick persons overboard, is also to jettison one’s own humanity. The implied question is does the supposed inhumanity of the slave justify the brutal control system?

The slave ship is portrayed then as a floating micro society based on terrorist violence, in which persons reinvent themselves relationally. *Feeding the Ghosts* makes it clear that slavers are equally trapped in a sadistic, debasing and dehumanizing micro society, reduced by their role as exploiters and caretakers to an even lower level of bestiality than that of the slaves. They too breathe daily the filthy contaminated air generated by unwashed masses, and become habituated to cries of suffering such that “they were no longer heard as signals of distress, but as part of the whole, all-encompassing fabric of routine.” (10) On the slave ship, as is the case with every terrorist regime, systematic violence must not only be executed but it must be extreme enough and public enough to keep the masses in a state of perpetual dread. It is not
sufficient to throw sick slaves overboard; they must be drowned in full
sight of the queue of slaves at meal time, to invest the action with its
full intimidatory power.

One reading would argue that the excesses of cruelty become vi-
able because of distance from the constraints of decency and the estab-
lished social order. Conversely these so called Western “emissaries of
enlightenment” and “bearers of the spark from the sacred fire” are argua-
ibly living out the dictates of the said Janus-faced social order. Spectacle
and theatre are pivotal to the process and culture of debasement. Obser-
vations on the inner calibration of the slave psyche are based on
externalities. The black skin of the slaves which does not readily show
bruising is interpreted as demonstrating their suitability to a life of
toil and physical abuse. Their skilled dancing indicates their enduring
capacity for pleasure even when the dance is enforced through whip-
pings. As for the pleasure of gaze, when mass voyeurism of attempted
rape, is flouted by the flow of menstrual blood, the anticipated pleasure
and subsequent disappointment of the spectators is matched by that of
the perpetrator. Sadiya Harmans argues: “...enjoyment was predicated
on the wanton use of slave property. It was attributed to the slave in
order to deny, displace and minimize the violence of slavery” (25).

The binary reads White/black; Christian/heathen; Anglophone
vs “gibberish”; Civilized//savage; Propero/Caliban, Cannibal; Literate/
iliterate. The construction of the enslaved as the ignorant, acquiescent
subhuman, labouring body was crucial for the enterprise. Any asser-
tion of the humanity of the enslaved was injurious to the cause. These
binaries which were difficult enough to maintain when the requirement
is to massacre innocent helpless captives, collapse when challenged by
Mintah to whom the first mate owes a debt of gratitude. She represents
the ground on which illusions of Western modernity find full play. The
slavers are overwhelmed by a literate Christian slave who assesses their
actions from a higher moral location than they occupy. Since it is im-
possible to strip her of these attributes, the slavers must take recourse
to increasingly extreme acts of violence to dehumanize and silence her
and teach her “her place.”

Paradoxically even in D’Aguiar’s economy, her capacity to chal-
lenge Europe’s civilizing order rests on the extent to which she has
already been socialized into its mores and dictates. For an enslaved
African to carry the symbolic weight within the narrative, she must
needs be creolized. Her capacity to intervene and act as an intermedi-
ary between the cultures is predicated on and commensurate with the
erasure of her alterity. She is also emblematic of the potential of the
slave to imbibe civilization.

In a reversal of the Prospero Caliban dynamic, Mintah the
Christianized slave had earlier nursed the sick first mate Kelsal on African soil and in response to the amnesia induced by his illness she had imparted to him the gift of his name. In the vulnerability of illness and loss, he exchanges names with Mintah, in an assertion of equality and reciprocity, free from the taint of supremacy. Significantly this exchange is grounded in the Danish experiment with the potential for inter-ethnic encounter which is free of exploitation and fair to both parties. Within this remembered context, she interpellates him as a fellow human being through her voice emanating from deep within the bowels of the slave ship. A human demands from a human, humane treatment and accountability for other human lives ... “she shouted his name at those hands for the offense of beating, for the offence of holding a living body and slinging it over the side into an uncaring sea” (38). Kelsal fully understanding the nature of the requirement, suspends reason when a black body calls his name, and resorts to revenge.

As the massacre proceeds maliciously and systematically, the power of naming becomes the only weapon left. The slave about to be drowned calls out her name to invoke her individuality, uniqueness, nature, purpose and lineage within family and community. This is the call that must be silenced at all cost if the enterprise predicated on the sub humanity of the slave is to bear fruit. Unwillingness to acquiesce transforms Mintah into a dangerous body which must be subjugated. She is the body who refuses to be drowned, and which is thereby infused with a supernatural power of transcendence. Her very existence is sufficient to display the potential for rebellion. This potential remains muted. Coerced to dance through the whip, she dances the fertility dance to no avail because her lack of acquiescence proves too provocative to the slavers who damage her fertility and quell her into woodenness through the most extreme torture by stuffing her genitals and her eyes with pepper. This induces so strong an impulse to escape her body that she lapses into woodenness, dissociation and apathy.

This power of naming is also invoked by Nourbese Philips who after exhausting archival searches for the names of the 132 drowned souls on the Zong, names them herself. Nourbese Phillip recounts her inner devastation when perusing the Zong’s register to find the drowned humans listed as “man…. woman….. girl meager.” Her haunting reading of the manuscript (unpublished at the time of writing of this essay) calls up and foregrounds their humanity. The extended poem sets out to clothe the drowned in flesh. The final and most evocative section of the collection of poems was derived by outlining key words of the court transcript of the 1783 Gilbert vs Gleason judicial proceeding, and then fracturing the words to allow them to speak the depth of the atrocity the words originally set out the justify. The fracturing becomes
the fragmented voices of the enslaved who seek to tell a tale which is fundamentally unspeakable hence can only be expressed in the gaps, erasures and interstices of the writing. For the reading, staged at the University of Miami Archaeologies of Black Memory Seminar in July 2007, Nourbese carefully removed her shoes as if for grounding and grunts the fractured words in hollow guttural tones. She reads as one possessed and constrained to articulate a glossalalia whose non meaning conveys the essence of an experience which cannot be made to mean. Significantly in commentary after the reading Nourbese Philip indicates regrettably the impossibility of telling this tale without recourse to expressing what perhaps can be interpreted as the growing descent into madness of the sea captain, who upon realization of the atrocity he has perpetrated throws himself into the ocean. To me, it seems a fitting indicator that imperial impulse and its carriers in successive generations must “die” if “the human” is to live.

Reflecting confluences with Nourbese’s Philip’s inner processes and writerly agendas in undertaking the resuscitation of the Zong, D’Aguiar explains:

Fiction is working in a psychotherapeutic way. The writing of it is in the drama of it you feel both the hurt of the era and the memory and the recuperation of that memory. You also get the sense of now being fully in charge of your present because the gap that was willed away has now been bridged. I think fiction is trying to do that. (Interview with Joanne Hyppolite)

The Middle Passage becomes a trope for the cataclysmic encounter between worlds. Mintah muses that life exists on land. “The sea is the place between lives: I float on it in the hope that my life can begin at some point in time. ...The sea keeps me between my life.” (199) It is an interstitial space on several counts - between land masses, between societies and cultures, between lives and, as D’Aguiar argues, between memories:

...the water became a new geography that they write their memory into. The memory is on the land you’ve left and the place you’re going to is the unwritten text, and everything you do in preparation for getting there is done on water. Water then becomes this shifting library of sorts. I like to think of it as a library with books that can be rewritten since it is moving, never stationary. It gives you a chance to revise yourself. (Interview with Joanne Hyppolite)
The water – the repository and fluid shifting ground of meaning and memory – is the central focus of David Dabydeen’s extended poem *Turner* which is linked intertextually with the famous J.M. W. Turner (1775-1851) painting modeled on the Zong massacre and entitled *Slave Ship or Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On* (1840). Dabydeen’s preface quotes the famous art British Art critic John Ruskin’s acclamation of the work as “the noblest sea that Turner ever painted...the noblest certainly ever painted by man” (Quoted in Dabydeen 7). Ruskin terms the ship “guilty” in an oblique reference to its murderous act of dumping sick human beings for the sake of collecting insurance. The blood guilt of the enslaved is responsible in no small measure for the “multitudinous seas incardinine” and sky and the judgment of the looming typhoon. The *Slave Ship* was exhibited at the Royal Academy to coincide with the world anti-slavery convention held in London in 1840. Gilroy reads the painting as: a “powerful protest against the direction and moral tone of English politics” citing in support of this view an epigraph which Turner draws from his own poetry “Hope, hope, fallacious hope where is thy market now?” (Gilroy 14). Critical dialogue has focused on the manner in which the painting reflects the 19th aesthetic of the sublime which submerges the subject in the interest of spotlighting the piercing illumination which is the focal point of the painting. In Dabydeen’s words, “Its subject -- the shackling and drowning of Africans was relegated to a brief footnote in Ruskin’s essay. The footnote reads like an afterthought, something tossed overboard” (7).

One man’s moment of intense beauty and contemplation is another man’s carnage. Of interest to this analysis is the attempt to recover the submerged reality of the sea journey from the vantage point of slaves drowned at sea, as blatant sacrifices to the god of materialism. Dabydeen reacting to the interface between this painting and the 19th century evocation of the amoral aesthetics of the sublime sets about clothing the victims in flesh, formulating in the process an entire community of ocean dwellers who pick up the lament and articulate their memories, hopes, aspirations and reactions to the horrific events which determine their location. The testimony grapples with how to counteract epistemic violence which has relegated a people to an afterthought? How to give voice to what Dabydeen terms as the “submerged head of the African in the foreground of Turner’s painting” which has been “drowned in Turner’s sea for centuries?” (7) What is the potential for invention in relation to its quest for belongingness? How to shake off entrapment in a grievous history in order to begin anew?

The I narrator of the poem is a slave drowned by Turner who encounters in Turner’s latest victim and part-born offspring, a catalyst
for rememory and reinvention of the past. The part-born thrown overboard becomes the wound that cries out a pain that is not otherwise accessible. The poem which ends some 30 pages later with the statement “There is no mother… No mother” (41-42) places the acute pain of mother loss at the centre of the narrative. In the beginning, the cries of the birthing woman, like an eviscerated wreckage is the only sound which pierces the stillness, except for the murmuring of women:

Still born from all signs. First a woman sobs
Above the creak of timbers and the cleaving
Of sea, sobs from the depths of true
Hurt and grief, as you will never hear
But from woman giving birth, belly
Blown and flapping loose and torn like sails,
Rough sailors’ hands jerking and tugging
At ropes of veins, to no avail. Blood vessels
Burst asunder, all below ---deck are drowned.
 Afterwards, stillness, but for the murmuring of women (Turner I: 9)

The part-born itself cannot speak until it has been mothered into expression by the drowned slave who is surprised by the joy of being accorded surrogate motherhood. The drowned slave is then mandated to become the wound that speaks.

The text presents an interplay of traumatizing catalysts which multiply with the identities of the drowned persona, the ship’s captain, and the victims of his infamous acts. For Dabydeen, the encounter between worlds is essentially of a psycho-sexual nature. Perverse interpenetrations abound lending the fictional universe a multiplicity of Turners. Turner is the artist and door keeper of a Western aesthetic sensibility which would sublimate his civilization’s horrific action in contemplation of an amoral sublime beauty; Turner is the gentle seducer of children who lures them to his ship with sweets and shada juice even as they innocently wonder “why are the elders in chains” (IV: 14); Turner is a pedophile who fondles boys in quiet corners and “finds” them tousled on his bed at night; Turner is the ship’s captain who like Shakespeare’s Prospero imparts language, world view and ideology, along with furtive slimy interpenetrations which he ministers to boys and women alike; Turner is also the sallow offspring of the Captain’s black concubine, the part-born tossed overboard; Turner is the fable, the “miracle of fate… the longed for gift of motherhood” born of the drowned persona’s persistent courting of the moon (I:9).

A most fundamental catalyst of trauma is separation and individuation which surfaces initially in the realm of personal history. Let
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us agree to admit the autobiographical dimension. Dabydeen owns the metaphorical part-born in an interview with Kwame Dawes, in which he indicates that he negotiated pitfalls of racism and shame in relation to his Indo Caribbean heritage from the vantage point of a ward of the British state. Dabydeen claims: “I feel like the stillborn child in Turner definitely. Or even worse than that, I feel like an abortion; messy and bloody and unborn, and that partly because of racism” (219). Race as an over determined signifier is figured here as pivotal in the incapacity to bring latent potentialities to birth. Dabydeen purports Turner is really about the absent mother: “the absence is the mother, not the life in the child.” (Interview with Dawes 220). The drowned slave narrator addressing the same lack, invents a personal, domestic and communal history which lends comfort of belonging: “I dream to be small again even though…. (III: 12) Not even the fantasy of childhood is sufficient to subvert the fate of near drowning (When I strip, mount the tree and dive I hit my head on a stone at the bottom of the pond. I rose up dazed, I float half dead bleed for days afterwards” (III:12). The comfort is that here he is shielded by mother love. In the constructed past, the mother watches over small boy with sorrow. Hence the import of the final chilling statement: “There was no mother” (41) Encoded in Turner are severe mother child individuation and autonomy traumas which find no resolution.

The persona’s longing for the mother is connected to the longing for motherhood, and this too is flouted by the pernicious and persistent racism. Race is a catalyst of trauma when the material condition and consequence of racialised embodiment does violence to the soul and spirit of an individual, community and nation. So deeply embedded are racism’s tentacles that the floating woundedness of the half breed part-born without having attained embodiment, and having been loved into speech by the narrator, in its first words declares its ancestry in Turner’s abusive curses:

This creature kicks alive in my stomach  
Such dreams of family, this thing which I cannot  
Fathom, resembling a piece of ragged flesh  
Though human from the shape of its head  
Its half formed eyes, seeming jaw and as yet  
Sealed lips. Later it confirmed its breed,  
Tugging my hair spitefully, startling me  
With obscene memory. “Nigger” it cried, seeing  
through the sea’s disguise as only children can. (21)

Turner suggests that the trauma of embodied racism is so persist-
ent and insidious, it can survive even in the disembodied. In a symbolic economy, in which “it is the colour of a person’s skin which to a large extent positions every body in a social system of constitutive meaning… the inhumanity of slavery grew out of the binarized logic of free white bodies held in radical contra-distinction to the enslaved African black body” (Barrow 5). Why should the ideology of race supremacy flourish in the part-born, part-black, part-white progeny of the enslaved? The accusation “nigger” speaks to the persistence of Turner’s legacy; it also declares the internalized self-hatred which would mask itself and organize into different hierarchies, and in turn evolve within changing historical circumstances, and find reflection in fluid, ideological and material power bases. It is also a pivotal catalyst of intergenerational transfer of trauma and ongoing social injustice and inequities. Its submerged discourse screams within the most cultured and colour-blind societies.

Dabydeen sets out to explore in Turner the notion that “Empire” was a pornographic project:

...ultimately, the plantation experience had severe and traumatic psychic impacts that had to do with the loss of, or the traumatic changes in epistemologies and philosophies, but overwhelmingly had to do with what is the very ground of our beings, which is our body (Interview with Dawes 220).

It is with his body that Turner writes on bodies. A major objective of Turner’s inscription on the flesh of the enslaved, is to meet his victims at the cross roads where love encounters violence, and there, stun them into silence. Simultaneously Turner’s language (read perspective and world view) flows like the issue of oral sex into the perverted progeny of empire: “Turner crammed our boy’s mouths too with riches / His tongue spurting strange potions upon ours / Which left us dazed which made us forget / The very sound of our speech” (40).

For the women, Turner reserves the sadistic ministrations of whips, salt and stung wounds which seals Ellar into silence until he has “taken rage from her mouth./ It opens and closes. No word comes.” (39) This silence only lifts when Caliban learns a different language: “Each night aboard the ship he gave us selflessly the nipple / Of his tongue until we learnt to say profitably / In his own language, we desire you, we love / You, we forgive you” (40). Turner’s narrative inscription is complete when he pours into the boys along with issue of anal sex, value judgments, occlusions, erasures, the gaps which would allow them in turn, to echo Ruskin’s dialogue on the nineteenth century aesthetic sensibility, “blessed, angelic, sublime” (xxiv 40).
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The final concern in the connection between trauma, forgetting and languaging. Dabydeen terms *Turner* the only thing which he has written so far with which he is satisfied. It represents a resistance of the compulsion to speak from a fixed and by extension, exclusionary ethnic location: “... I spent twenty years just trying to find an Africanness or find an Indianness or find a Creoleness... now you settle for a world of your own making, and you settle for metaphor - the sheer beauty and autonomy of the metaphor” (Interview with Dawes 208-209). Indeed *Turner* would seek to make of this extreme loss, lack and emptiness, a radical reinvention rooted in metaphors of community, and love, and belongingness:

... I wanted to teach it  
A redemptive song, fashion and descriptions  
of things, new colours fountaining out of form.  
I wanted to begin anew in the sea  
But the child would not bear the future  
Not its inventions, and my face was rooted  
In the ground of memory... (XXV 41)

The ground of memory disallow newness. The irony is that this world of beauty and autonomy is itself, at every level, pierced with lack. Every attempt to begin anew on a new ground is riddled with the old inequities. Even the inhabitants of the deep cannot escape the markers of race and class.

The transcendence then is in the creative expression. A primary objective of the terrorist acts which under girded enslavement was to persuade the enslaved to adopt the location of subordination and inferiority, to persuade the subjugated bodies to imbibe the dictates and terms of their subjugation. The issue is can the coerced dance on the slave ship be an effectual fertility dance? The transcendence then is in the shaking off of this location and the bold self assertion of being and knowing that escapes the denigrating epistemologies of the colonizers. The symbol of transcendence in D’Aguiar’s *Feeding the Ghosts* is to be found in the wood. The slave lies in intense intimacy with the floor of the slave ship; hence, the wood, soaking up the blood, the sweat, the tears, becomes the primary witness and repository of suffering. The qualities of the wood also permeate the sufferers. The persistent torture reduces the protagonist to dense unfeeling woodenness – an ossified state which obviates feeling and thereby shields the self from pain. The clearest statement in the work of these writers is the imperative to transmute sites, objects and fixtures of suffering into sites of redemption. The child of a wood carver who has been lovingly taught the craft
by her father who refuses to give up the ancestral gods in favour of Christianity, Mintah creates in her home wooden creatures 133 plus ten more representing the victims plus the ten protestors who willing threw themselves over board in dissent against the torture. The spirits of the drowned come to live in and energize the carved forms. They become her children, her companions. They disallow forgetting as these their representations travel down corridors of time. Creative oppression empowers the survivor to redeem. The medium of this expression is the repository of suffering which is transmuted through creativity into life giving entities.

In *Turner*, the potential for transcendence also lies in creative invention. Indeed the poem is an experiment of how to credibly invent that which was not experienced; how to tell the unspeakable. Creativity and invention are undermined at the end by the persistent gap between the telling and the reality. “There is no mother, family/ Savannah fattening with cows, community/ Of faithful men; no elders to foretell...” (41). D’Aguiar hints at the same when Mintah dreams of being reunited with her lover and her book in a triumphant culmination of a life of brutish struggle. This is merely a nod in the direction of the romance. It is an ironic declaration that this tale cannot end “happily ever after.” The implied author details the romantic ending as a dream and then writes a second ending in which the senile old woman meets her death by fire – no book, no lover, no acclaiming crowd of young people. Just an incidental funeral pyre set while lighting a lamp. Both narrative representations of the *Zong* massacre speak to the incapacity of traditional narrative forms and conventions to tell the half that has never yet been told.

Dabydeen’s *Turner* and D’Aguiar *Feeding the Ghosts*, like Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, George Lamming’s *Natives of My Person*, Erna Brodber’s three novels, and Elizabeth Nunez’s *Prospero’s Daughter* demonstrate the imperative of Caribbean writers to revisit the encounter between Europe, Africa and Asia which gave birth to the New World. The brutalities of the encounter so overwhelmed the psychic resources of the enslaved at the point of occurrence, that we are only quite recently over the temporal distance of decades, and within the safe enclaves of academic halls and conventions of discourse beginning to grapple with it. Applying trauma’s quality of belatedness to the issue of the periodization of colonialism, Barrow argues that it is only those whose material conditions allow them to escape the scars of colonialism who can embrace the “pastness” implicit in the term post colonialism. Coloniality is certainly not over and done with for the populations who continue to live the aftermath of the enterprise of the Indies: “There are ongoing traumas for many millions of people whose lives
Lucayos are disproportionately circumscribed by the often intense suffering created by the changing face of power structures that have transmogrified into neo-colonialism, cultural imperialism and now the injustices (racial, gendered and classed) inherent in the universalistic notions of global capitalism” (Barrow 21). Incapacity to grasp the enormity of the trauma at the point of its occurrence brings both numbing belatedness and intrusive memory as the subconscious mind catapults it into the conscious, repeatedly demanding that it be confronted and addressed. The creative artists whose work we have been examining here have been outstripped the other critical commentators in their willingness to give expression to the submerged and unspeakable. The critical minds have lagged behind in terms of finding a language for articulating the discourse.

“Re-membering our Scattered Skeletons” was written in 2007 as one of the myriad backward glances conceived to the mark bicentennial of the legislative abolition of the transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans (1492-1870). The legislation which entered the statute books on March 25, 1807, made it illegal to engage in the slave trade throughout the British colonies although the trade continued nevertheless in between the Caribbean islands until 1811. Much of the discourse emanating from the former imperial centres which marked the recent bicentennial commemorations, was, for the most part, self congratulatory of the triumph of Britain’s enlightenment and justice. This stance prompts a broader application of Cornel West’s statement in relation to America: “No other democratic nation revels so blatantly in such self deceptive innocence, such self paralyzing reluctance to confront the nightmare of its own history. Suffice it to say that another story must needs be told.” (14) The creative writers of the Caribbean and the African diaspora are taking up this challenge with the insight and authority rooted in corporate suffering. They are masterfully wielding the authority to forgive but not forget. These writers are envisioning liberatory patterns of interaction which call Turner and Kelsal to account, in the interest of preserving the human. Congratulations in this season properly belong to these creative writers who are telling the half which has never yet been told.

Notes

1 Wilson Harris argues that traditional, monolithic societies ossify in terms of their social structures, values and world views. He terms the imperial encounter a happy catastrophe as the clash of ethnicities, epistemologies and world views breaks fixed structures and liberates new creative potentialities.

2 The journey which has brought diverse people groups to the New World has been explored fictionally by numerous authors including but not limited to by George Lamming (Natives of My Person), Derek Walcott (Pantomime), John
Herne (The Sure Salvation), David Dabydeen (Turner). It is the foundational trope of Paule Marshall's (Praise Song for the Widow). The poets have also engaged this theme, for example Mahadeo Das “They Came in Ships”, Olive Senior “Meditation in Yellow” and Edward Braithwaite “Columbus on the Afterdeck”.

3 It is the African American Toni Morrison who in the process of resurrecting the beloved victim of infanticide to communal awareness and a long awaited ritualistically empowered laying to rest, speaks to the anomaly of a people of oral tradition who emerge from the excesses of the Middle Passage without a story “to pass on”. (Beloved)

4 In Capitalism and Slavery, historian Eric Williams gives a dismal overview of losses aboard the five slave ships: “The losses sustained by these five vessels amounted to 617 out of a total cargo of 1,933, that is 32 percent. Three out of every ten slaves perished in the Middle Passage” (122).

5 John Ruskin was a famous British art critic and author of the book Modern Painters. Four years after it was painted, Slave Ship was give to young John Ruskin by his father. In his book, Modern Painters, Ruskin called Slave Ship “the noblest sea that Turner ever painted ... and if so, the noblest certainly ever painted by man.” “If I were reduced to rest Turner’s immortality upon any single work,” Ruskin declared, “I should choose this.” Ruskin owned the painting for 28 years and then, succumbing the morbidity of its subject despite the sublime sky, he sold it to a collector in New York in 1872. “I think as highly of it as a work of art as I ever did,” Ruskin explained. “I part with the picture because, as I grow old, I grow sad, and cannot endure anything near me either melancholy or violently passionate.” The painting was purchased by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in 1899.


6 Ruskin’s description reads:
Purple and blue, the lurid shadows of the hollow breakers are cast upon the mist of night, which gathers cold and low, advancing like the shallow of death upon the guilty ship as it labours amidst the lightning of the sea, its thin masts written upon the sky in lines of blood, girded with condemnation in that fearful hue which signs the sky with horror, and mixes its flaming flood with the sunlight, and, cast far along the desolate heave of the sepulchral waves, incarnadines the multitudinous sea.


7 This statement resonates with the African American spiritual: “Sometimes I feel like, a motherless child a long way from home”.

8 Erna Brodber actually came to creative expressions as she sought for a tool to communicate to the “children of the people who were put on ships on the African beaches and woke up from this nightmare to find themselves on the shores of the New World.” (Caribbean Women Writers: 164)

9 Barrow critiques Jean Rhys’s Wide Sargasso Sea as implicated in the process of “colonial cover up” (34) for the manner in with Rhys appropriates a submerged trope of maroonage to describe the historical abandonment of and dispossessioning other white Creoles and elides specificities of black historical
trauma and resistance: “White individualized family trauma thereby replaces the collective subaltern history, and the many ways in which slaves fought back against the white ruling class” (33). The reading invites us to view both blacks and whites as being “victimized alike by imperialists” (35). While I agree that it is essentially dishonest to erase the specificities and radical difference in the suffering encountered by blacks and whites during slavery and emancipation, the creative writers are consistently making the point that traumatic impacts of this cataclysmic nature cannot be reserved for its victim. The perpetrator is equally trapped and therefore compelled to embark on cycles of remembering, forgiveness and atonement.

10 Despite opposition from a variety of people with vested interests, the abolitionists and their supporters persisted. In 1806, Lord Grenville made a passionate speech arguing that the trade was “contrary to the principles of justice, humanity and sound policy”. When the bill to abolish the slave trade was finally voted upon, there was a majority of 41 votes to 20 in the Lords and a majority of 114 to 15 in the Commons.

**Works Cited**


http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/blackhistory/rights/abolition.htm

“Making life”: Displacement (and its antidote) in the work of Lorna Goodison

Anthea Morrison

Intensely personal and at the same time shaped by the collective adventure of her fellow Jamaicans, Lorna Goodison’s poetry has memorably evoked the journeying impulse which for many Caribbean migrants is both privilege and affliction. Yet Goodison, though perhaps victim of what she has called “quest fever” (in the poem “Natal Song”1) would hardly consider herself a writer “in exile”, and the frequent real life journeys which bring the poet back to the “rock” reward the reader in her second collection of stories, Fool-Fool Rose is Leaving Labour-in-Vain Savannah. However, while this 2005 volume, characterized by a sometimes gritty realism, is vibrantly and solidly rooted in the Jamaican homeland, it is not without the angst of displacement. One of the stories, appearing more autobiographical than fictional, is set in the United States2; another tells of the return home, after years of absence in England and North America, of a female protagonist (who encounters an aging, overweight “Dream Lover”, ostensibly the boyfriend of her youth, but perhaps even a changed, late twentieth century, Jamaica), while two narratives chronicle the trials of young women who go to Kingston hoping “to improve themselves”, but end up retreating to their “country bush”. This paper attempts a reading of the journey home of the protagonist of one of the latter stories in conjunction with the dreamed-of “return to the native land”3 which is a central motif in the sometimes sombre Controlling the Silver, also published in 2005.

Controlling the Silver, while celebrating the heartland of Jamaica, suggests that the poet/traveler is not as unencumbered by limitations of time and space as she appeared in a much earlier volume, in which Goodison asserted the finite nature of a self-imposed “exile”. In “Heartease New England 1987”, the persona listened to Bob Marley’s music levitating across a New England square - and asserted her own impulse to flight:
...Someone is playing
Bob Marley and the notes are levitating
across the Garden Street end of the street.
They appear first as notes and then feather into birds
pointing their wings, arranging themselves for traveling
long distances.
And birds are the soul’s symbol, so I see
that I am only a sojourner here but I came as friend
came to record and sing and then, depart. (Selected Poems, 107)

Implicit in the dream of going home held by many Jamaican
nationals living abroad is return to a very nurturing “small place” (not
like Kincaid’s!), a rural landscape embodying an imagined or remem-
bered purity and simplicity for which many left on the rock also yearn.
While Goodison has affirmed her own complex belonging in the semi-
humorous assertion that “I am a townie” (at the First International
Conference of Caribbean Women Writers, Wellesley College, 1988),
many of her poems underscore a need for the solace of the mountains
that embraced our maroon ancestors, her love of the joys of her moth-
er’s “country”, made verdant by river water. The poet (who now spends
much of her time in urban North America) explains, in “How I Became
a Writer”, her early longing for a world other than that circumscribed
by concrete: “The yard I grew up in had no trees...When I first went
to visit my mother’s country – that is, the district of Harvey river in
the parish of Hanover – I was overwhelmed by the beauty of trees and
green things growing. As soon as I could have a say in where I lived, I
chose to live outside of cities” (Caribbean Women Writers, 290).

Too complex a writer to hide behind the reassurance - so neces-
sary to many Jamaicans - that “town” and “country” are binary oppo-
sites, Goodison nevertheless exploits – and sometimes problematizes - the
urban/rural opposition which is deeply embedded in the national psyche.
Thus she remembers her first meeting with her country cousin Joan by
recalling a time, and a place, which offered “bank to bank safety”:

When at age seven our two eyes made four,
you were my first cousin who taught me
how a river named by our generations
was benign, would not harm, but pull and haul,

bank to bank safety. You said to me, sit there
on the grave stones town girl, sit and learn
how to discern between one good duppy
and a bad one. (“Dear Cousin”, 6)
Several of the texts included in *Fool-Fool Rose is Leaving Labour-in-vain-Savannah* also allude to the dynamic of town and country. One is particularly compelling in its representation of the “trials of Kingston” as experienced by a young woman who faces disillusionment in the big, bad city: in the disturbing “Alice and the Dancing Angel”, the protagonist, Alice, hailing from St. Thomas, comes to Kingston in the hope of studying dance, but ends up as a go-go dancer in a seedy establishment. The narrative begins in the words of the emcee, who becomes a sort of latter-day story-teller/griot, with a salacious twist:

And now, fresh from St. Thomas, the parish of our National Heroes, we present to you the sexy scotch bonnet, hotter than a bird pepper, jerk seasoning or pickapeppa, sweet like a sweetpepper, cool black and comely like the queen of Sheba..... *Aliiiice*. (54)

In a dramatic turn of events at the end of the story, Alice finds herself endangered during a violent episode at a street dance, but with the help of a creolized (black) guardian angel, manages to save her own life and that of her infant child by stepping to the beat of the empowering Kumina, the memorable African-based ritual for which St. Thomas is known. Terrified as gunshots ring out in a crowded street, Alice calls on her heritage of dance, both traditional and contemporary:

And this is when the angel comes over and holds Alice around her waist and starts to ride the rhythm with her. He holds her tight and they hold Kenisha between them and they dance. Bogle and Tatie past the lickshot of bullets (62)

So she retreats from Kingston (Babylon?) to St. Thomas, not simply a comforting pastoral landscape - pleasing to tourist and natives alike - but implicitly repository of a nation's culture, and courage, the courage of Paul Bogle and his like. The open-ended format of this short narrative leaves the reader uncertain of the outcome of Alice's return journey, and that uncertainty makes possible – with postmodern elusiveness - the failure of the attempt at reintegration. Yet I think it important that Alice’s story evokes in microcosm the need to go back “to weh we come from”, and that it privileges and is structured around the memory/mirage of home so compelling in the more personal poems of *Controlling the Silver*.

In the latter volume, there are no magical solutions, no “angel ex-machina” for those who wander far from their roots. In foregrounding the notion of “making life”, Goodison is clearly sensitive to the fact
that the term exile, loosely used, can be self-indulgence, for those who voluntarily leave village or island place of origin, in the same way that a certain critical discourse may appear, by privileging the angst of those writing in new diasporas away from Caribbean homelands, to elide the very real concerns/dilemmas of those still “back a yard”. In the contemporary era, the description (in the 1939 *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*) by Aimé Césaire of Caribbean peoples as “ceux qui n’ont connu de voyages que de déplacements” [those whose journeys have all been uprootings], while still compelling when journey functions as trope for the massive dislocation begun with the transatlantic passage, may appear facile and too forgiving if universally applied to those who “have passport/visa, will travel”. The poignant “Island Aubade” which begins *Controlling the Silver* is self-consciously nostalgic for a time of simple rootedness, for a place of plenty; as in so many Goodison poems, food lavishly shared is the bounty of the generous heart, and so the persona recalls a kitchen

where I stood over a gas stove and stirred, porridge
for my boychild, for his dog, cornmeal and beef bones.
Stirred, till we arranged ourselves as migrating birds. (3)

Reluctant migrating bird though she may be, Goodison is careful not to reach for epic grandeur in recording her own crossings, for example in the poem “Making Life” from *Controlling the Silver*, in which the writer elaborates on various possible answers she could give to a too-curious (or “fast!”, as we say in Jamaican) student who questions her prolonged sojourn in “foreign”:

“is it because we came from a continent
why we can’t settle on our islands?

Did our recrossing begin with deportation
of maroons to Liberia via Nova Scotia?

Are we all trying to work our way back
to Africa? For soon as we fought free
we the West Indians picked up foot
and set out over wide waters, to Cuba

and Panama, anywhere in the Americas.
And we never call ourselves exiles.

We see our sojournings as “making life”... (70-71)
In this section of the poem, the persona speaks in the collective voice, and one wonders if in her choice of the Creole idiom “pick up foot”, which may startle when juxtaposed against the image of wide waters to cross, Goodison is not rewriting the mythical return to Africa of the Igbos evoked in Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow*. The journeys around which this poem are structured tend to be more modest in scope and intention than Marshall’s, and the persona ends by returning to her own ambiguous situation, here amidst the “grey snowbank[s]”, as if to deliberately de-dramatize and at the same time personalize a Caribbean story:

I first came north to paint pictures, but maybe I wanted firsthand acquaintance with the fanciful places named in songs. Isle of Joy, the song said Manhattan was.

I’m from island in the sun, I had to come and my sweetheart poetry joined me.

Not really exiled you see; just making life. (71)

It is striking here that the islands are not marginal, no more than Manhattan is center: while these last lines gently deconstruct two myths, both that of small island paradise and of metropolitan haven, the epigraph to the poem is instructive, even liberating: in the words of the great Bob Marley, “Jah never run no wire fence”, words which are strangely reminiscent of Aimé Césaire’s description in the *Notebook*, of Martinique as a “non-fence” island [mon île non-clôture].

Unfenced then, at least in their imagination, Goodison and her people will continue to hold on to islands and at the same time to pick up foot and run. A very short story from *Fool-Fool Rose*... celebrates, in resolutely understated terms, the capacity of West Indians to “make life” up north: “Wedding in Roxbury” positions the writer as narrator/spectator, eavesdropping on the nuptials of a young Jamaican from a family which has made its fortune in North America in the paty-business. Overhearing an American guest at the wedding describe this enterprise, the narrator adds an important correction which is also an affirmation of migrant resilience:

‘Yeah, they from Jamaica, come up here and made themselves a fortune off them beef patties and that hard bread.’

My people, I am so proud of my people. And the name of the bread is hard-dough bread. (*Fool-Fool Rose*, 91)
Thus poet and patty-maker have in common the ability to bloom even though transplanted; the tone of this narrative is strikingly different from that of an earlier short story “Bella Makes Life”, in the collection *Baby Mother and the King of Swords*, in which the journey up North seemed to signal a dilution of identity, even a descent into soul-destroying materialism. In “Wedding in Roxbury”, the community - and the individual - survive even while embracing change, while “thinking diasporically”⁴, as hard-dough bread colonizes foreign palates.

But in many poems from *Controlling the Silver*, remembrance of home and particularly of childhood is made sombre with the reality of loss, with the chastening awareness that the past is no longer retrievable treasure. In this recent volume, Goodison grieves for Joan, beloved country cousin discovered in childhood, with whom she shared the adult experience of homesickness. In the whimsically titled “Breadfruit Thoughts”, the persona, traveling within North America to visit her cousin, remembers the latter’s request for the simple comfort of breadfruit: “When you come again”, Joan said, “bring a breadfruit”.⁵ (It is hardly coincidental that food is an important motif in both of the collections on which this essay focuses: Goodison is particularly fond of evoking what Jamaicans term “hard food” - the solid nourishment offered for example by yam and dasheen, by breadfruit and sweet potato, nourishment which for which the imported convenience of fast food is no match).

With Joan, she had dreamed of return to familial roots, to an origin meticulously traced in the poem “Excavating” in near-Biblical language, a language nuanced by distinguishing creolism. As Velma Pollard has pointed out, “in Goodison’s hand the occasional JC [Jamaican Creole] item is like yeast in its effect on the mass of the poem” (*Motherlands* 246); one notes, in the following stanzas, the rewardingly different meanings of “to come” in the juxtaposed expressions “how we come” and “to come from”, as well as the satisfying emphasis inherent in the Jamaican usage “a one”:

...This is how we come to come from
the long-lived line of David and Margaret,
who begat Cleodine, Howard, Edmund,
Alberta, Flavius, Edmund, Rose, Doris
and Ann. And I am from Doris, and Joan
he was from Ann, but it was like we were
daughters of one woman. Come in cousin
from the cold: there are times a one has to
seek succour under own vine and leaf. (“Excavating”, 7)
Mourning offers a new lens through which to imagine a long deferred return, to revisit a land which, for all its turbulence, is frequently represented in the poet’s work as source of solace. Several poems of this volume – bearing evocative titles such as “Our Ancestral Dwellings”, “Tombstones”, “Back to where we come from”, “This River Named by Our Great-Grandfather” - are at once elegies for Joan and in muted vein, a celebration of what remains, an affirmation of community, and of a measure of continuity.

The solemnity of tone and the visceral connection to the past spill over into Goodison’s latest volume, the 2006 collection Goldengrove: the section comprising new poems ends with a moving evocation of the anguish of one who travels without return passage. The title of the poem - “Windrush Sankey” - historicizes a displacement which is both communal and individual: one is reminded here of the insightful comment by Edward Baugh, in a 1986 article on Goodison’s work, that “her voice, personal and unmistakable as it is, is increasingly, and whether she knows it or not, the voice of a people” (Baugh 21). Boundaries of time and place are blurred as the singer of this song of lamentation occupies a liminal space, poised on the threshold of the migration adventure, and yet already looking back at home with the jaded eyes of experience:

And because my parents were born
And are bound to die as canecutter

And grassweeder there in the fields
Of tough blood-at-root stalks of cane
I must leave my village called Albion
Without one chance for advancement

But the possibility of some hard food
Eaten night and morning with praise

I come carrying my big cardboard grip
with my other clean shirt and trousers,
my change of underwear, and a quart bottle of whiterum to sprinkle as I go

from all my people who love me, who
know my full name and who would not

let me die of hungry and cold in a room
Without even a shilling for the gas meter.

(Goldengrove: New and Selected Poems, 27-28)
The poem is memorable in its suggestiveness, in its rich potential to be read in different historical contexts. The place name Albion evokes both West Indian and metropolitan space; the persona is both solitary (fearing death “of hungry and cold”) and surrounded (by the accompanying spirits whose journeying ordeal he now repeats, and sanctifies with sprinkling of white rum); he is nameless, to the reader, and to the British among whom he will have to make a home – anonymous as were those first travelers destined to lose their African names – and yet comforted by the thought that there are those who know, and who will always remember, his full name, his “true-true name”.

In the poem “Change if you must just change slow”, Goodison situates her personal odyssey in a larger context, fusing the nostalgia of the communal voice inscribed in “Windrush Sankey” with her memories of the familial heartland, dreaming of a return to familiar sites, now in danger of treacherous change. Perhaps it is this poem that best brings together the aspirations and fears of travelers as apparently diverse as Alice fleeing “Kingston badness”, the unnamed, sankey-singing migrant from Albion, and even the poet herself:

We will crouch down then in a red earth
hollow, press our lips close to the earth
of this deep Cockpit Country and call out
please don’t change or change if you must
just change slow...
Little bit a country village place or woodland
name of Content, Wire Fence, Stetin, Allsides,
far from domain of gunman and town strife.
Country we leave from to go and make life. (Controlling the Silver, 61)

The poem plays fruitfully on the different meanings of “country” for Jamaican readers – nation, rural district, or Cockpit Country “with a capital C”, the latter referring to a region associated with epic resistance to slavery. To leave such a fertile landscape might seem lunacy, but “hard life” makes its own demands; and lest one accuse Goodison of romanticism in this muted celebration of a beloved “little bit a country village place or woodland”, other poems, such as “Jamaica 1980” (in the 1992 volume Selected Poems), foreground a bitter reality, that of the “domain of gunman and town strife”.

Several months after presenting the conference paper on which this article is based, I had the opportunity to read Lorna Goodison’s recently published memoir, From Harvey River (2007), and was struck by the extent to which this familial narrative elaborates on and echoes the angst – and inevitability - of mobility evoked in so many of
Lucayos

her poems. While accepting the imperative of tracing her own trajectory, Goodison, like countless Caribbean voyagers, yearns for a sort of fixity, for the stability of a revered, quasi-mythical place of origin. In *From Harvey River*, she relates her first visit, at seven years old, to her mother’s lush “country village place”, emphasizing both the terror of the “townie” who, on her first night in Hanover, “wanted to go back home, back to Kingston, where there was no such garden but there were bright electric lights (212)”, and the rapid conversion to, and immersion in, a seductive and healing landscape:

My cousins could swim, they just ran down the riverbank and leapt into the water. And I jumped right in after them; but because I could not swim, I nearly drowned. So I quickly learned to stay in the shallows and watch them swim the river, bank to bank. But I was so happy. I felt somehow that I would never come to any harm as long as I was immersed in that water named for my family. (212)

The prologue to *From Harvey River* foregrounds this dual belonging, this complex relation both to the remembered/imagined site of origin and to the new/provisional “home”:

Throughout her life my mother lived in two places at once: Kingston, Jamaica, where she raised a family of nine children, and Harvey River, in the parish of Hanover, where she was born and grew up…Over the years Harvey River came to function as an enchanted place in my imagination, an Eden from which we fell to the city of Kingston. But over time I have come to see that my parents’ story is really a story about rising up to a new life. (1)

It is important here that Goodison undermines the manichean certainty of a comforting myth of origin by the juxtaposition of images of fall and ascent – perhaps reminiscent of that larger Fall, that of enslaved Africans forced to reinvent themselves in a hostile “New World”.

For modern-day Jamaican travelers who form new ties, however tenuous, to “town”, or to “foreign”, and for the persona looking back in “Change if you must...”, the horizons of home remain visible, but return is not as simple as the protagonist’s trance-like flight from the “Wonderland” of Kingston in “Alice and the Dancing Angel”. Even the poignant memory of the presumably edenic spot where the young Kingstonian of “Dear Cousin” first met her future ally Joan is later undercut in a poem provocatively re-visioning Bob Marley’s anthem of
uprooted Africans. In “O Pirates Yes They Rob I”, the persona appears to make the return journey back with beloved cousin, only to be challenged by “capturer” pretenders:

Capturer cousins in a great land grab
Have claimed the ancestral Harvey house
And levelled it. A rickety banana walk
crowds the tombs.

...We are disinherited children,
you and I, who stand in the road and weep. (35)

So what then is the remedy, for those who stand to be disinherited, what is the antidote, if not to quest fever, at least to unbelonging? Perhaps there is none, for Goodison is too acutely aware of imperfection and of ambiguity, too conscious that “home” is neither monolithic nor frozen in time, to celebrate “Heartease Jamaica” as final destination. Yet the mother island remains compelling even in absentia. One remedy, one strategy available to the poet may be naming as ritual, naming to counter the amnesia which is the real displacement, naming of ancestors familiar though long gone, and naming of sites such as “Albion” and the more prosaic “Patty Hill” (and - in decidedly less dulcet tones - of “Me No Send You No Come”). Savouring, like Walcott, the pleasure of “giving things their names” (Walcott 294). Naming Harvey River, Heartease, Bloody Bay, Discovery Bay...and the list goes on! Naming not always with the exuberance of youth, but as act of defiance – and fidelity - in the face of life’s several detours. One compelling example of this near-reverence for the evocative names of Jamaica is found in a poem from Controlling the Silver which traces a convoluted journey through milestones recalled by a once “small child/pressed in the back seat between big people”. Though the title of “Recalling the Fourteen Hour Drive from Kingston to Lucea, 1953” strikes a lighter note than many other poems in the collection, it can also be read as foreshadowing various adult peregrinations, various “rivers to cross”; in this journey encompassing both the tranquil haven of “Old Harbour” and the perils of the formidable Mount Diablo:

At least fourteen pit stops or maybe more
for engine fires to be extinguished,
to pee in the bush, then to Old Harbour
for Arawak bammy and crisp fry fish.
we leave come sun up, taking the two-lane highway,
risking our necks over Junction
Lucayos Road. Chant psalms aloud, as we careen
down and around Mount Diablo’s hairpin bends.
(Controlling the Silver, 11)

To go back to where this essay began, the early “Heartease New England 1987” acknowledged and even revelled in the comfort of rootedness while in motion. The poem is peopled with various characters, some homeless, others simply in “exile”; one of the latter is an African who, through his solitary storytelling, is able to escape geographical limitation and to reconstitute absent community:

...one evening in November
I see an African in Harvard Square.
He is telling himself a story as he walks
in telling it, he takes all the parts
and I see that he has taken himself home.
And I have stories too, until I tell them
I will not find release, that is my mission. (106)

Perhaps Goodison, too, is telling herself stories in order to guard from taint of mildew the archives of the heart. Perhaps what will always remain, in her oeuvre, irrespective of physical location, is the power of the word to cross horizons: by juxtaposing names as resonant and apparently contradictory as “Content” and “Wire Fence”, by invoking names like “Arawak” and “Old Harbour”, names that memorialize a time long gone, by inscribing the stories of those who travelled and those who remain, she nurtures self, and others, with the hard food of memory.

Notes

1 From the 2001 collection Travelling Mercies.
2 “Wedding in Roxbury”: it is interesting to note that while the name Roxbury is clearly American, it might also evoke, for the Jamaican reader, Roxburgh, the birthplace of national hero Norman Washington Manley.
3 The expression obviously echoes Aimé Césaire’s seminal poem of journeying, Cahier d’un retour au pays natal [Notebook on a Return to the Native Land].
4 “Thinking Diasporically; Home Thoughts from Abroad”, lecture by Stewart Brown presented at the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus, 1998.
5 Controlling the Silver, 79.
6 An allusion to the grandmother figure in Merle Hodge’s Crick-Crack Monkey (Andre Deutsch, 1970) whose real name was known by few; see also Her True-True Name, eds. Pamela Mordecai and Betty Wilson (Heinemann, 1990).
7 Jamaicans’ love of the rural landscape is in part fired by the proprietorial
Making Life

impulse of descendants of slaves, by the appreciation of generous expanses of land denied the inhabitants of Kingston’s many ghettos; it is the love of that land which, in the frustrating years after Emancipation, was both the ambition and the solace of the former slaves inhabiting the first free villages, who “never expect” (the title of a Goodison poem from Travelling Mercies) such felicity.

One of the many resounding place names in the poem “To us, all flowers are roses”, from the collection To Us, All Flowers Are Roses (University of Illinois Press, 1995).

Works Cited


for our blood, mixed
soon with their passion in sport,
in indifference, in anger,
will create new soils, new souls, new ancestors; will flow like this tide fixed
to the star by which this ship floats
to new worlds, new waters, new harbours, the pride of our ancestors mixed
with the wind and the water
the flesh and the flies, the whips and the fixed fear of pain in this chained and welcoming port.

~ Kamau Brathwaite “New World A-Comin’”

The authenticity of “Blackness” has continuously been challenged in the debates over identity politics, specifically within Black Cultural Studies, Black feminisms, African American Studies, and Postcolonial Theory. The meaning of the word “Black” often depends upon the social, historical, cultural, and geographical context, but it is almost invariably political. In the United States, Black refers to African Americans (including mixed people of African descent because of the “one drop” rule), while in Britain, the term Black politically generally categorizes all non-white people—Asians, Africans, and Afro-Caribbeans (Kanneh 86). In the Caribbean, the word “Black” is usually used to describe people of African descent, but its history remains
complex given the array of reactions to racial mixing by different colonial powers (meaning the development of racial categories determined by blood and coded by law). Each European colony had legal codes and categories for mixed race identities, which created different “classes” of people determined by skin color. Today, the word “Black” has different political and social meanings, but at the same time, we cannot deny the realities of race and racism for Black people and other people of color around the world. Furthermore, mixed-race Black identities continue to have a major affect on how we think about race and identity. And considering the different political and social connotations of the word “Black” and the massive consumption of Black culture, “Blackness” as a signifier remains elusive and subject to appropriation and commodification; hence, Blackness has been and continues to be constructed and commodified by all kinds of people and places.

Therefore, any essential notion of ‘the Black subject or experience’ has been contested by a number of theorists; however, Stuart Hall argues for a “new politics of representation” that engages in difference and recognizes Black experience as Diaspora experience (170). In essence, he argues that we must remain committed to engaging in the politics of Black representation, while simultaneously recognizing the differences within our difference. The challenges to “identity politics, recent debates over ‘mixed race’ identities, forms of racism, and class complicate the broad terrain of ‘racial difference’ on which ‘Blackness’ is identified” (Kanneth 94). In these debates, postmodernism has been helpful to Black Cultural Studies insomuch as it allows for multiple Black identities, but as bell hooks recognizes in “Postmodern Blackness,” the postmodern critique of identity appears at first glance to threaten any opportunity for those who have suffered from oppression, domination, or colonization (hooks 23). But hooks argues that a postmodern critique of essentialism is useful in opening up constricting notions of Blackness, and this would be a radical and serious challenge to racist discourse that uses the notion of a Black authentic experience (28). She asserts that “such a critique allows us to affirm multiple Black identities, varied Black experience. It also challenges colonial imperialist paradigms of Black identity which represent Blackness one-dimensionally in ways that reinforce and sustain white supremacy” (28). While hooks does posit that we critique and abandon essentialist notions of Blackness, at the same time, she says that we must still “struggle for radical Black subjectivity”—where the lived and diverse experiences of Black people complicate our sense of identity (29). Although hooks does not specifically discuss mixed-race identities, I use her insights to discuss the possibilities around the signification of “Blackness.”
Given the recent media attention on mixed-race and bi-racial identities (including Tiger Woods, Barack Obama, Kamora Lee, Alicia Keys, and others) and the historical fetishization of “exotic” women of color, I am interested in how racial performance and performativity operates in a mixed-race body, and most specifically, how these complicate the signification of Blackness. Thus, how is the Blackness of a mixed-race person embodied? What does this embodiment of Blackness mean for a mixed-race person? Are mixed-race Black identities normalized through choosing a race, passing, or legal codes that regulate race? How is mixed race situated in the discourse of racism? When a racially mixed person claims or asserts Blackness through performance or a speech act utterance (I am Black, but I’m mixed, or I’m mixed and Black, or I identify as Black) does this destabilize racism or essentialist notions of race? In this project, I offer a theoretical framework about what I call the sexual politics of mixed-race identities and performance of Blackness in the Caribbean context, which I argue through using both personal narrative and literary representations.

While a number of theorists have defined performance and performativity, I utilize E. Patrick Johnson’s framework in Appropriating Blackness because he deals with race in explicit and provocative ways. While Johnson considers issues of race from both white and Black perspectives, even internationally, he never engages the issue of mixed-race identities and how this might affect the performance of Blackness or racial performativity—which is my contribution in this project. His avoidance of this subject speaks to the United States’ “one drop” rule, which allows little possibility for a mixed-race Black person to identify as solely mixed, but rather, this person would have to identify as Black or attempt to “pass.” Johnson argues that attempting to secure any specific or authentic attributes of “Blackness” is in reaction to its slipperiness, and thus, it is in the “mutual constructing/deconstructing, avowing/disavowing, and expanding/delimiting dynamic that occurs in the production of Blackness is the very thing that constitutes ‘Black’ culture” (2). He posits a notion of “performance” that encompasses “aesthetic, cultural, and social communicative events, interpretive practices, and critical methodologies,” as the vehicle through which Blackness is appropriated (6). He sees both a dialogic relationship and a dialectic forged between performance and Blackness, where Blackness does not only reside in the theatrical fantasy of the white imaginary that is then projected onto Black bodies, nor is it always consciously acted out; rather, it is also the inexpressible yet undeniable racial experience of Black people—the ways in which the ‘living of Blackness’ becomes a material way of
What Racial Hybridity?

knowing. In this respect, Blackness supercedes or explodes performance in that the modes of representation endemic to performance—the visual and spectacular—are no longer viable registers of identification. No longer visible under the colonizer’s scopophilic gaze, Blackness resides in the liminal space of the psyche where its manifestation is neither solely volitional nor without agency. (8)

In other words, performance collapses under the ‘weight’ of Blackness because of the lived racial experience of Black people where its manifestation reflects at times choice, yet can also be unconscious and the affect of day to day realities. For instance, when Blacks are asked/expected to ‘put away’ their Blackness, they are being asked to adjust speech, mannerisms, and in essence, any performance of Blackness, but the material reality of living and being Black in a racist society remains—the expectation that one can separate from the embodiment of Blackness speaks to its slipperiness. Another poignant example of this dialectic would be when Blackness is performed consciously as resistance to white racism and supremacy deliberately and strategically. However, as Johnson argues, “performance may not fully account for the ontology of race” (9), and I would say this is because “Blackness” can be performed by someone who is non-Black and thus removed from the context of the lived (material) experience of Black people. Yet Johnson views the relationship between performance and Blackness as a useful way to analyze Black cultural performance and racial identity while grounding performance in praxis.

With this in mind, I am defining the performance of blackness as a conscious display of Black cultural identity that erupts from the signification of blackness. But then how do we reconcile this performance of blackness with the bodily experience of being Black? The notion of performativity may be helpful in explicating these nuances of Blackness in which performativity appears more embodied and unconscious than performance. Using Judith Butler’s notion of gender performativity, Johnson asserts that “racial performativity informs the process by which we invest bodies with social meaning” (9). Considering this process, my view of the performativity of race means the embodiment of Blackness or Black identity, the signifiers of Blackness placed onto Black bodies, or what we can describe as the material reality of racial experience in a racist society. In discussing Marlon Riggs’ film *Black Is...Black Ain’t*, Johnson explains that this documentary represents a Black identity and body through both performance and performativity:

Insofar as identity is performed and experienced as real, it
constitutes a legitimate way through which subjects maintain control over their lives and their image. But performance does not foreclose the discursive signifiers that undergird the terms of its production. ...I will focus on the dialectic created between performance and performativity, demonstrating why one critical trope necessarily depends on the other in the process of identity formation. Black Is... Black Ain’t demonstrates just how over-determined Black identity and authenticity are by elaborating on the ways in which skin color alone is simultaneously an inadequate yet sometimes a socially, culturally, and politically necessary signifier of Blackness. (18-19)

If we take this process of identity formation through performance and performativity seriously as Johnson suggests, then we must find ways of reconciling the “interplay between discourse and materiality” (40). In the film, Riggs critiques the “cleavages” among Blacks, making the assertion that “depending on where one is from and where one is going, Black is and Black ain’t” (40); however, he also exposes “the social, political, economic, and psychological effects of racism and the role racism has played in defining Blackness” (40). Therefore, Riggs’ focus on both the differences among Black people and the consequences of embodied Blackness operates as a discursive strategy in fighting racism on multiple levels. This film and Johnson’s reading of it participate in what I see as an imperative call by hooks to create radical Black subjectivity through a critique of essentialism while emphasizing the diversity of lived experience and multiple Black identities. In conceiving of multiple Black identities through both performance and performativity using hooks’ theory of postmodern Blackness, I see mixed-race identities and experiences as implicitly included in discourses of race and racism. To return to the questions I posed earlier, how then do the performance and performativity of blackness operate in a mixed race body of African descent that does not necessarily signify typical morphological ‘Black’ markers?

As a multiracial woman of African descent born and raised in Nassau, Bahamas but currently living in the United States, I have experienced a myriad of reactions to what many people perceive as my “racial ambiguity.” I am frequently asked the question, ‘What are you?’ or ‘Where are you from?’ This perception of “ambiguity” stems not only from my physical features that are a racial mix of Black, Chinese, white, and Native American, but also in my cultural and national identification as Afro-Caribbean and Bahamian—made more complex because I have light skin and “good” hair. Since I don’t have the ‘typical’ Black racial markers of dark skin and kinky hair, but rather other mark-
ers like full lips, a wide nose, and “voluptuous” hips, my racial identity within the Caribbean context has usually been perceived as “mix up,” “half breed,” or even “practically white” because I could “pass” in certain ways. Although I was often the lightest skinned person in my classes growing up and experienced feelings of isolation because I felt different, I learned at a very young age that there are benefits to being light-skinned. While growing up in The Bahamas, I self-identified as “other” or “mixed” because of my light skin, which marked me as “not quite Black” but I knew I was “not quite white” either. This “choice” stemmed from my desire to gain mobility, but in retrospect I now see it also as a product of internalized racism or self-hate. Moving to the United States for college in my early twenties sparked many changes in my conceptualization of racial identity because of the “one drop” rule there, along with the legal and social codes concerning racial categories in which ‘technically’ I am Black. And in my mid-twenties, I made the political decision to self-identify as only Black. While I came to this decision through an acceptance of my own history and culture, I was challenged to do so through my education and experience of racism in the United States. Specifically, after engaging in graduate school with the incredibly complex history of slavery, colonization, and race relations in the Americas, I found myself unable to comfortably identify as “mixed” or “other” any longer because I realised the shame I carried around about my past had everything to do with my “Blackness”—my African ancestry and growing up poor.

I was raised primarily by my Black grandmother in Bain Town, Nassau, Bahamas—a poor, working class black neighborhood (what we call ‘over da hill’), and this experience was most fundamental in forging social and cultural perceptions of my identity (that being Afro-Caribbean and Bahamian). My grandmother Mabel Sistella Charles was born and raised in Inagua, and came to New Providence when she was just 16. She did not speak much about her past, but from what I remember and have traced through family stories, she worked as a cook and domestic worker most of her life until she was hurt on one of her jobs. At that point, she had already raised four children on her own and had also helped raise two of her grandchildren, including me. While my grandmother was a very proud Black woman, she was insistent that I never marry a Black man because with my light skin and “good” hair I could be the one to “make it” out of the ghetto, get an education, and take care of the family. As a product of a colonial (mis)education, my grandmother associated being Black with being poor and having no opportunities, whereas being white came with privilege, and the “in between” or mixed-race people could essentially “choose” depending on how “white” or “Black” they appeared or even acted—or one’s racial
performativity along with one’s racial performance. I think my grandmother’s expectations of me grew out of what she saw as my mother’s inability to operate in this “in between” space—my mother was the one child she conceived with a white man, the product of her troubling affair with a British Methodist priest in the 1950s for whom she worked as a domestic; my mother never met him. Despite my grandmother’s hopes, my mother never “made it out,” so that responsibility became mine. Although my mother often talked about the tensions she felt growing up and never fully fitting in anywhere, she identified as Black, but attempted to gain status through conceiving me with a mixed-race man (a combination of Chinese, white, Black, and Native American – as we like to say in the Bahamas, all mix up). As a result, I was encouraged and even expected to excel in school and succeed. These expectations from both my mother and grandmother can be seen throughout the history of racial mixing in the Caribbean and also indicative of the sexual politics of race and racial divisions.

Growing up in The Bahamas, I very rarely had conversations about race or racial mixing. As I teenager, I felt ashamed of being poor, and I worked hard to distance myself from where I grew up. And since I associated being poor with being Black, I tried to “mask” my “Blackness.” In other words, I chose to be silent about my racial identity in certain situations in order to gain opportunities such as jobs, scholarships, and promotions, and I strived to meet my family’s expectations to succeed—using my light-skinned privilege. In fact, I did this so much that “masking” became easier and easier, a kind of performance, as I perfected my “proper” English, socialized primarily with white people and those who could “pass” as white, and avoided conversations about growing up poor and my racial identity. In retrospect, I do not believe that my grandmother or my mother would have ever wanted me to hide my Blackness, but rather they too understood strategically performing or not performing Blackness. This “masking” through performance could never affect my embodied identity, no matter my silence or social circles. However, I did benefit from my performance because I was able to take advantage of opportunities that I don’t think would have been available to me had I been darker skinned or had not performed strategically.

In my mid-twenties, I realised I did not have to hide who I was, but I was faced with the reality of being in a multiracial body where I felt like I had to “claim” my Blackness. I began openly talking about my life growing up, sharing stories about my mother and grandmother, and asserting my identity through my experiences and personal history. And I did this through conceiving of my identity through historical, cultural, and political terms. Nevertheless, I am very aware of being a
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mixed-race Black woman with light skin and “good” hair, and therefore conscious of the light-skinned privilege that comes with being mixed. But I am also aware that the “Blackness” I embody carries with it not only my family history of 1950s colonial rule, but also a very particular kind of history. This history is one of African enslavement in which Black women were consistently raped by white men, and one where miscegenation (racial mixing) could mean denigration but also privilege.

Racial mixing has consistently been represented in Caribbean literature (and African American literature), particularly through the tragic mulatto and narratives of passing in which racial hybridity is for the most part vexed and almost impossible. I will discuss briefly two literary representations that I find most intriguing for this project, which are Ella in Erna Brodber’s *Myal* and Clare in Michelle Cliff’s *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven*. Clare is a particularly fascinating representation of mixed-race people in the Caribbean because Cliff carefully details Clare’s family history and accounts for her light skin and class privilege and mobility. Through Clare, Cliff engages in the difficult issues of sexual politics during and after plantation slavery—a history in which racial mixing signifies not only white privilege but also colonization of places and people. Similarly, Brodber’s depiction of Ella reveals the complexities of the sexual politics of mixed-race identities before independence in Jamaica. Ella is regarded by the community as an oddity but at the same time is expected to do well because of her light skin and “good” hair; yet Ella’s physical and mental breakdown after she attains socio-economic mobility represents the devastating effects of colonial control over the mind, bodies, and spirits of Caribbean people. In both novels, the Black mixed-race characters must confront and deal with their racial identity, specifically in terms of being descendants of African slaves. I assert that both characters embrace their Blackness in social and political ways, and their subject positions can be seen through Gayatri Spivak’s work on the subaltern and what she describes as “a strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest” (205). Perhaps it is the embodiment of Blackness even within the Black mixed-race body that speaks to the ways in which racial mixing has been used to further control and normalize racial categories.

In considering the term “racial mixing,” it is important to note the long history of mixed-race identities in the colonial/imperial context, and to think about how race became an ordering mechanism that categorized people and legally coded racial difference through mixed-race. Investigating the sexual politics of race in colonialism, Laura Ann Stoler in *Race and the Education of Desire* extends Foucault’s project in *The History of Sexuality* by rerouting the history of sexuality through
the history of empire, while incorporating Foucault’s later lectures on race and racism. Ultimately, this reveals that racial configurations were constitutive to the cultivation of the bourgeois self and that the construction of being “European” and being “white” is implicitly raced. She argues that race must be positioned along with sexuality as an ordering mechanism: “Such a perspective figures race, racism, and its representations as structured entailments of post-enlightenment universals, as formative features of modernity, as deeply embedded in bourgeois liberalism, not as aberrant offshoots of them” (9). Therefore, the reactions to racial mixing during slavery which vacillated between fascination and abhorrence not only helped to produce modernity, but it also produced the sexual politics of race, where people were racially categorized and coded. This gave rise to the sharp divisions among people living in the colonies and the even stricter divide between motherland/colony, colonial/native, developed/underdeveloped, First World/Third World, and Modern/Traditional. Postcolonial theorists have discussed similar issues regarding the ways in which much of the developing world remains outside of modernity. As C.L.R. James and others have asserted, the Caribbean is positioned in the West, but is never of the West, historically outside of time, yet a major producer and conduit of Western modernity. Similar to Paul Gilroy’s assertion in *The Black Atlantic* that people of African decent have been instrumental to modernity, Mimi Sheller in *Consuming the Caribbean* argues that the Caribbean has been vital to the development of Western modernity but has been continuously left out both temporally and spatially (1). This serves to maintain the dichotomies mentioned above, but it also produces social and economic inequalities and underdevelopment in the former colonies of Europe. Moreover, I would argue that these dichotomies and divisions were developed and maintained through race and the sexual politics of race, in which racially mixed people had to be “ordered” and “normalized.”

The discourses surrounding miscegenation and racial mixing during slavery illuminates this policing of mixed-race identities, which reveals the paradox evident in the acceptance and non-acceptance of mixed-race people. While Stoler discusses the management and economy of sex and the legal system that policed “mixed-blood” children, specifically in the Dutch East Indies, we can certainly extend and complicate her argument using other colonies across the Americas. She argues that colonial regimes were not based on systems of alliance, but rather, concubinage was very common; these “illicit” sexual practices were considered sexual disorders of the colonial society, which produced a discourse that encouraged the control of both natives and certain classes of Europeans. The deployments of both alliance and sexuality were part of the colonial order of things (46). However, by the
mid 19th century, racial mixing was considered “a dangerous source of subversion, a threat to white prestige, the result of European degeneration and moral decay” (46). Foucault asserts that the bourgeois concern over racial purity and cultivation of the body gave rise to racism, and as Stoler argues, we can see this clearly in the discourses on miscegenation that combined notions of tainted, flawed, and pure blood with those of degeneration and racial purity (50). These discourses produced imperial politics of exclusion and legal codes that determined racial status. In Foucault’s lectures on racism and racist discourse, he argues that the 19th century “power over life” turns the right to kill into an excess of ‘biopower’ in which modern racism becomes the mechanism of the state to categorize and define hierarchy based on race (Stoler 84-85).

Regardless of Foucault’s clarification of racism in his lectures, Stoler explains that Foucault’s project remains limited because he does not make the connection between the normalization of the bourgeois and the imperial context, which she attempts to do in her book:

There is no place made in Foucault’s account for the fact that discourse that surrounded the fear of “internal enemies” was one that was played out over and over again in the nineteenth-century imperial contexts in specific ways: where those who were “white but not quite”—mixed-blood children, European-educated colonized elites, and even déclassé European colonials themselves—contested the terms of that biopolitical discourse and found themselves as the new targets for ‘internal purification.’ (93)

In essence, she argues that racism is derived as Foucault said from an excess of biopower, but also from an excess of nationalism as Etienne Balibar argues (93). Her interest in mixed-blood children, educated colonized elites, and poor colonials lies specifically in this fear of “internal enemies” and how these people fought for racial, class, and citizenship status in Europe. Furthermore, Stoler delineates the sexual politics of race and how this affected class within the colonies in order to better understand the development of the European bourgeois order and its racial underpinnings (94-95). Therefore, her project appears to have little or no concern with the lives and experiences of ‘natives’ or the colonized in European colonies because her focus is to re-conceptualize Europe with and in empire. Regardless, her arguments and research are helpful in discussing many colonial contexts, and for the purposes of my project specifically because she is “placing race in Foucault,” whose theories of normalization and ordering mechanisms complicate the sexual politics of race and racial mixing. Furthermore,
I am interested in the lived experiences of mixed-race people and how racial coding was enacted upon those who troubled and defied racial boundaries—hence, the sexual politics of mixed-race identities.

Similar to the Dutch East Indies context that Stoler describes, the process of creolization (mixing of European and African) in the Caribbean was also regarded as moral decay, corruption, tainting, racial degeneration, and so on, where racial and cultural mixing was considered by Europeans as leading to decadence and excess, but at the same time used to order and classify race (Sheller 116). Kamau Brathwaite, in his invaluable study *The Development of the Creole Society in Jamaica 1770-1820*, defines the process of creolization as the “cultural action—material, psychological and spiritual—based upon the stimulus/response of individuals within the society to their environment—and as white/Black, culturally discrete groups—to each other” (296). He explains that these interactions between the dominant whites (Europe) and the Black slaves (Africa) formed a “new” construct that must be seen as an integration of the two, with a vast array of mixing (people, cultures, customs, rituals, languages, religions, etc.). His project reveals the constant interchange (clashing and mixing) that occurred between all people in Jamaica at that time, which has contributed to the present day race, colour, and class dynamics seen across the Caribbean. He explains how the strict divisions (apartheid) between whites and non-whites regardless of status had numerous exceptions specifically because white men desired and had sexual relations with Black, brown, and yellow women, and as a result, ‘colored’ people challenged the divisions and were thus given certain privileges through their “whiteness.” Therefore, the process of creolization continuously challenged “the colonial order of things.” Despite the efforts of European colonials to posit a racially segregated and harmonious Caribbean to the colonial governments and potential colonials, the actual picture of the Caribbean during slavery was one filled with racial and cultural mixing that was viewed as degeneration, sexual corruption, moral decay, and decadence. Black enslaved women were often blamed for this “sexual corruption,” while they suffered rape at the hands of white male slaveholders and planters, who used rape as a form of control and torture and as a way to maintain their slave populations. But these spaces and people in them had to be controlled and categorized into hierarchies that suited European colonials, elites, and white Creoles—especially when mixed-race populations grew and demanded status through their white ancestry.

As a result of racial mixing during slavery, a growing “colored group” emerged who was regarded as a “separate socioracial category that may aspire to social status and to economic positions traditionally
closed to blacks,” but social distinctions remained between whites and ‘coloreds’ (Hoetink 70). To put it another way, mixed-race or ‘colored’ groups were able to attain socio-economic mobility, yet they historically existed in this “in between” space. In “‘Race’ and Color in the Caribbean,” H. Hoetink traces the history of the patterns of race relations in the Caribbean in an effort to understand contemporary race and ethnic relations. He discusses the Caribbean’s Hispanic countries separately because of similar language, religion and economic evolutions, but asserts these as only common circumstances in which very real differences in race relations have occurred (68). For non-Hispanic countries, he emphasizes the difficulties in looking at these distinct countries because of their different languages, cultures, and historical development, but he finds specific patterns in the evolution of race relations. Specifically, he analyzes Trinidad, Suriname, and Guyana separately from the rest of the non-Hispanic Caribbean because of the large Asian population of indentured workers that completely changed their racial dynamic even though their early history is very similar to that of the rest of the non-Hispanic Caribbean (68-69). By doing this, he offers this pattern of race relations:

A basic pattern evolved in which a tiny minority of whites (owners or overseers of plantations, some technical staff, colonial bureaucrats and clergy, large and small traders and their clerks, and some artisans) occupied the highest rungs of the social ladder (though they were internally divided into the classes and factions according to wealth, education, and occupation). The mass of slaves and their descendants were at the other end of the scale, while a mixed, colored section, although often desperately poor, received preferential treatment from the dominant whites whenever there were intermediate jobs that no whites could or would take. In this way some coloreds succeeded in time in obtaining positions of a certain prestige and remuneration without, however, being accepted as social equals by the whites. The ultimate reflection of the durable social distance between these two groups is the continuing aspiration of the white group to preserve its racial endogamy. (69)

He argues that the discontinuity among these groups did not happen for the most part in the Hispanic Caribbean because he sees more of a tenuous yet continuous racial grouping and even interchange, whereas in non-Hispanic countries, the lower ranks of the colored group often opened up access to Blacks (70). Therefore, the socioracial structure at the bot-
tom was more fluid, but nevertheless the entire racial power structure still operated to maintain white privilege and superiority by coercing colored elites (yet they were complicit in the structure) to emulate white groups even though they were rarely “allowed” into these groups (70).

During slavery and even afterwards, the mobility of mixed-race groups often depended upon the dominant whites to provide those opportunities. And since they remained in this “ambiguous position,” Hoetink argues this is why their alliances shifted during slave revolts much more frequently than their Hispanic counterparts (70). Similar to Stoler’s analysis of the Dutch East Indies and most specifically on point with Brathwaite’s study of Jamaica, Hoetink’s breakdown here illuminates a discussion of racial mixing because this pattern shows how ‘coloreds’ or mixed-race people historically existed in this “in between” space of being “not quite white.” Bahamian historian Gail Saunders has traced in her work the race and class divisions that existed in the Bahamas from slavery through post-emancipation. In her study of social life in the Bahamas, she explains that there were four major social groups – at the top were the white elite, in the middle were “the browns or coloureds” ranging “from off-black to near white,” and at the bottom were the majority, the Black labouring classes, and among them were marginal poor whites (15-20). Saunders discusses how mixed-race people in the Bahamas post-emancipation were able to attain social and economic status and built a middle class between the 1880s and 1920s specifically. Regardless, they still faced racial prejudice from the white elites, and the status within the middle class was stratified by skin colour and economic success. The Black labouring classes were considered socially inferior by both the white elites and mixed-race groups. These race and class divisions were created through slavery and maintained post-emancipation; and even through the political struggle for black majority rule, these social divisions can still be seen across the Caribbean. These racial categories were made more complicated post-slavery because of the Indian and Chinese indentured workers who were brought to the Caribbean, especially to Guyana, Trinidad, Suriname, and Jamaica, by European planters (who did not want to pay the newly freed Africans what they demanded in wages).

By the time countries in the Caribbean started fighting for independence, Black people were already in quite notable positions within civil service, education, and law enforcement that used to be occupied solely by whites and ‘colored’ elites. Regardless of this mobility, the significance of the racial groupings and the relationships between colored and Blacks discussed earlier still apply—particularly given the ways in which the colored elite have allied with the lower ranks of blacks and coloureds to gain power and control from whites (Hoetink 71-72). Once
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again, we can see how race is used as an ordering mechanism specifically through mixed-race identities which trouble and disturb racial groupings, consequently this created an even more rigid and complex social coding of race, which still affects the intersections between race, gender, and class across the Caribbean. The history outlined here is a brief overview, and we must note that different islands have variations and exceptions regarding the racial categories. Moreover, migrations within, to, and from the Caribbean have also affected racial dynamics. Historically, upwardly mobile Blacks and mixed-race Blacks from the Caribbean integrated into African American communities and were able to gain social and economic mobility in the United States. Caribbean migrants of African descent moving to the United States must fit into the already prescribed, legally coded categories of race in terms of white or Black (and Hispanic and Hispanic non-white or Afro-Latino/a) because there were no legal codes for mixed-race until recently with the category of “Other” or even social groups for mixed race like there is in much of the Caribbean—although this is changing with the current fascination/fad with mixed-race identities. Migration affects the ways in which Caribbean people identify racially because one must adapt and/or conform to the racial codes, along with other social codes of gender and class, in that place which changes over time and may conflict with or complicate one’s own identification; these experiences also provide awareness of the commonalities of being an African Diasporic subject—inside and outside the Caribbean.

In my experience of migrating from The Bahamas to Florida, I had to negotiate the social and legal codes for race. During my first few years of college, in addition to my national and cultural identification as Bahamian, I used the category of ‘mixed’ and ‘other’ as a way of identifying myself in social groups and for legal purposes. Whenever I was asked “What are you?” or “What are you mixed with?” I explained, but I became offended by the questions—“Are you sure you’re not Hispanic?” “Are you Filipino?” or “You’re Bahamian? You don’t look Bahamian.” I often reacted to these statements by stating firmly “Don’t look so confused, what you think Bahamians look like? Anyway, I’m mixed.” Being “mixed” in the U.S. context means for the most part that you are Black. This experience, along with knowing my history and culture, led me to identifying as Black solely. This decision was not only personal and spiritual, but also political. I believe that Black people and Blackness continue to be devalued, and people of African descent must take part in creating a change in how the world sees us and how we see each other. My process of being comfortable in ‘claiming’ my Blackness has been a struggle wrought with the tensions found in the history of racial mixing and the sexual politics of mixed-race identities. In trac-
ing the history of racial mixing in the colonial and Caribbean context, it is clear that racial coding supported Western dichotomies in which racial mixing had to be contained and normalized to effectively control the colonies.

But now we are in this postcolonial and neocolonial moment in which some people think that racial mixing will create a harmonious future. I have serious doubts that it will, not only because of a history and herstory that tells us otherwise, but also we are simply not there. A former supervisor (white older American male) after inquiring about my racial identity said to me that he imagines the world will “look like me” once “the races continue mixing.” His comment was not only idealistic about race relations (we still live in world that is for the most part racially segregated), but it also shows how racial mixing can be seen as a kind multiculturalism – a vision for the future. However, one needs only to look at racial mixing during slavery to see that even as racial mixing troubled the boundaries, at the same time, it created new divisions. Even though I can see the power of refusing categories and identifying as “other” as a form of resistance, I also realise that “other” carries little political weight because it supports a kind of liberal idealism where multiculturalism is the answer to racism. My experiences and studies have shown me otherwise—that racism is structural, a system of oppression imbedded into the social and legal fabrics of many societies, which has directly contributed to the social and economic disparity of people of color around the world. Whether we “see” issues of race, class, and gender, they exist and have structured the societies in which we live. In The Bahamas specifically (and more broadly across the region), we avoid talking about race and class, and we try to convince ourselves that slavery and colonization no longer affect us. We live in a male-dominated culture that is too silent about violence and abuse against women and children. We spend too much time constructing and re-producing our culture for everyone else but ourselves. We need to spend more time uncovering the silences that control us. We must understand who we are and where we come from in terms of place, history, and culture. We are rooted in the African Diaspora, and whether or not one is of African descent, this is we history and we culture.

Notes

1 Theories about performativity are most often associated with gender studies by theorists such as Judith Butler, who specifically uses J.L. Austin’s notion of the performative in speech act theory along with Jacques Derrida’s reformulation of it through citationality:

Performativity is thus not a singular “act,” for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it
is a repetition. Moreover this act is not primarily theatrical; indeed its apparent theatricality is produced to the extent that its historicity remains dissimulated (and, conversely, its theatricality gains a certain inevitability given the impossibility of a full disclosure of its historicity). Within speech act theory, a performative is that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names. (12-13)

Butler then asserts using Derrida that the power in this naming is not a function of the subject or its will, but rather it “is always derivative” (13), that is, never original. While these concepts can be useful in theorizing about the power of naming, it is beyond the scope of my paper. I am using the notion of performativity here in terms of racial performativity and the performance of Blackness.

The term “good” hair refers to how close “black” kinky hair is to white or Asian hair, which is considered to be “good” in terms of texture and style. In both African American and Caribbean communities, a black person having light skin and “good” hair as a result of racial mixing is generally seen in a positive light.

While I find the term “colored” to be very useful in this history of racial mixing, I think that terms such as “mixed race” and “racially mixed” are more appropriate and helpful in conceptualizing the present day context. However, I use the term “colored” in this section of my paper in order to engage in this history and context that both Brathwaite and Hoetink provide. Moreover, in the current Bahamian context, we rarely use if ever use the term “colored”, but rather, use other words such as “mixed” to indicate mixed race using skin tones as more of a descriptor (for example, light skin, yellow, red, mango skin, brown, dark, and Black).

Works Cited
The history of the islands can never be satisfactorily told. Brutality is not the only difficulty. History is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies.

This year, Nobel laureate Sir V.S. Naipaul celebrates his 75th birthday. The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine campus, plans to mark the occasion with a number of special events including a symposium entitled “V.S. Naipaul: Created in the West Indies.” The title obviously – and ironically? – alludes to the (in)famous Naipaul quote, cited above. What might “created in the West Indies” mean now? What did it mean in 1962 when The Middle Passage was published? In this paper I want to offer a few exploratory remarks towards a hypothesis: that in certain cases, being “created in the West Indies,” then as now, is to be made – especially in the case of writers and writing – for export.

While I cannot recall ever seeing any product labeled “Made in the West Indies,” the tag is firmly affixed to the literature that we come here to celebrate. True, we might quibble about whether the correct term is “West Indian” or “Caribbean,” or whether we need to qualify it with linguistic or ethnic prefixes. But in 2007 there is no question whatever that there exists an internationally recognized corpus of writing, and body of writers, created in the West Indies. We teach it; our students read it; histories are written about its development; theoretical works expand the reaches of its nomenclature beyond national and regional boundaries to include diaspora, postcolonial and other new categories of writing may emerge. There is even a West Indian literary canon, contested these days, but nonetheless consistent in most
literary histories, anthologies and critical studies. And the work of V.S. Naipaul is very much a part of that canon.

Not without controversy, however. Currently, the work of Jean Rhys generally makes the canon too. Yet there was a period when the inclusion of *Wide Sargasso Sea* in a Caribbean literature syllabus was hotly debated in regional literary journals, and questions raised about the racial, residential or political qualifications required for conferment of the West Indian stamp of authenticity upon a text or a writer. Even more hostile critical reactions attached to another suspicious “outsider” with unfashionable, “reactionary” political views, who published fictions about the colonial damage to and complex affiliations of a previously invisible group in West Indian literature, those of Indo-Caribbean stock. For his critical analysis, Naipaul was denounced as a colonial; an English rather than a West Indian writer; a traitor; a “postcolonial mandarin” who negatively depicted Caribbean society. A *Newsweek* feature of 1980 cites the protests from local critics: “they dismissed him as ‘a cold and sneering prophet’ who dealt only in ‘castrated satire.’” And surveying Naipaul’s literary career, Caryl Phillips notes that

It has often appeared as though, in order to distinguish himself as separate and apart, Naipaul has decided to be hypercritical of and at times extraordinarily insensitive to the human condition as it appears in, what he would term, less civilized parts of the world than the West, including of course his native Trinidad” (189).

My question is whether we can now engage with a new “critical moment” (Alison Donnell’s term) when such judgements of Naipaul’s writing might legitimately be revisited, and some of his critiques of Caribbean society scrutinized for current relevance?

What I am tentatively suggesting is that when we look back over some fifty years of West Indian literature, Naipaul’s early works – the West Indian phase of his writing, on which I focus here – still have something to tell us about our situation. Specifically, these fictions feature characters who increasingly see their social and economic reality as restrictive; who inhabit “outsider” status at home in the Caribbean; who have internalized a colonially determined, outward directed consciousness; and who crave export, escape from the parochial limitations of their environment. This condition is still discernible, if differently configured, in recent West Indian fiction, and the result is the same: displacement, migration. Why the common motif: constriction and the desire for escape? Well firstly, because as Naipaul has been at pains to reiterate, alienation was part of what it meant to be “created in the West Indies.” Is this still the case?
As John Thieme has commented, the vast majority of Naipaul’s work, fiction and non-fiction, “has been concerned with the human consequences of imperialism in colonial and post-colonial societies.” In *The Middle Passage*, for example, he articulates this colonial conditioning: “Trinidad was too unimportant and we could never be convinced of the value of reading the history of a place which was, as everyone said, only a dot on the map of the world. Our interest lay all in the world outside, the remoter the better” (36). To be modern was “to ignore local products and to use those advertised in American magazines”(40), to mimic imported manners and values, to style oneself on foreign film stars. And Naipaul accurately pinpoints the source of this self-denigration, this mimicry, this need for external validation. It is the legacy of colonial history:

> [t]his was the greatest damage done to the Negro by slavery. It taught him self-contempt. It set him the ideals of white civilization and made him despise every other. (62)

> Again and again one comes back to the main, degrading fact of the colonial society; it never required efficiency, it never required quality, and these things, because unrequired, became undesirable. (53)

George Lamming, Austin Clarke and Merle Hodge are only some of the writers who have reinforced Naipaul’s skewering of colonial education with its dual – and dysfunctional – worldview; and Naipaul’s *The Mimic Men* sketches with devastating insight the school as a breeding ground for mimicry. “My earliest memory of school,” Ralph recalls, “is taking an apple to the teacher. This puzzles me. We had no apples on Isabella. It must have been an orange; yet my memory insists on the apple” (90). No wonder, given his indoctrination into the fantasy of Englishness (“the coronation of the English king and the weight of his crown, so heavy he can wear it only a few seconds”) (90) that he needs to see his Caribbean reality through the prism of a storybook fantasy: “calendar pictures of English gardens superimposed on our [Caribbean] villages of mud and grass” (89). Real life, reality, the real world, lies elsewhere for such colonial subjects. Schooled in mimicry, steeped in colonial insecurity and alienation, Naipaul’s characters seek to find themselves elsewhere.

Reinforcing the desire for escape is Naipaul’s representation of the colonial Caribbean as a place where difference is rarely tolerated. In *The Middle Passage*, for example, he observes of Trinidad that ambition, excellence, the desire to achieve are regarded with suspicion:

> It was... a place where a recurring word of abuse was ‘conceited’,
and expression of the resentment felt of anyone who possessed unusual skills. Such skills were not required by a society which produced nothing, never had to prove its worth, and was never called upon to be efficient. And such people had to be cut down to size or, to use the Trinidad expression, be made to ‘boil down.’ (35)

Gordon Rohlehr comments on the painful scene in Biswas, where Shama smashes her daughter’s beautiful doll’s house, a gift from Mr Biswas, because in the communal world of Hanuman House it is unacceptable to single out one child for such distinction. “Anything which manifests individuality and difference causes dread, envy and hostility in Hanuman House,” he notes (137). Mr Biswas insists on asserting his individuality and so, Rohlehr continues, he has to leave the communal space, face the void, the fear of nonentity, the meaninglessness of the unknown outside world. Always there is the need to escape, to leave behind conformity to the mediocre norm and find a space where individual subject positions can be explored. Mr Biswas feels that “[r]eal life was to begin for them soon, and elsewhere”; the temporary sojourns are but “a pause, a preparation” (147). Interestingly, Rohlehr ties together the portrayal of Biswas and the narrator of Miguel Street with the escape of Naipaul the author. “Rejecting Hanuman House and Miguel Street as two sides of the greater nightmare of being an Indian in Trinidad, he [Naipaul] seeks the freedom of the independent personality, and makes the difficult choice of exile and dispossession” (138).

I would like to suggest that the exposure of Caribbean intolerance for certain forms of difference – and the apparently concomitant alternative of exile and displacement for such ‘outsiders’ – is part of Naipaul’s legacy. Very generally, his early work speaks to the desire of those with aspirations (to make something, to write, to become artists, to become educated) for escape what is demonstrably a materialistic, semiliterate colonial society obsessed with race and class, a society which demands that literature is writing for “my people” first. Speaking equally generally, one can argue that Jamaica Kincaid’s early works detail the desire of women who wish to inhabit subject positions other than the traditional female role expected of them also seek to escape a conservative, patriarchal colonial Caribbean society. María Cristina Rodríguez maintains that one important consequence of migration by women involves “rejecting or reorganizing negative gender assumptions: a woman’s ‘place’ in island society as sex object, a faithful, passive and subservient wife, or the sacrificing mother of baby boys” (12). Rodríguez suggests that nostalgia for “what women lose” in migrating is consistently tempered by memories of problematic situations left behind: “kinship abuse, gender oppression, sexual repression, violence...
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repressive and controlling fathers and mothers, abusing husbands... the burden of domestic work, the absence of male breadwinners ... and gender fixity” (19-20). Certainly, it is “gender fixity” that both protagonists in Annie John and Lucy categorically reject and cite as their motive for fleeing their island society. And too, why the writer leaves? Certainly, the 960s Naipaul would totally share Kincaid’s assertion in 1997: “I could not have become a writer while living among the people I knew best” (My Brother, 162).

Finally, let me suggest that Naipaul’s construction of alienation and trauma at home for those who are ‘different,’ and the possibility of fulfillment abroad, finds resonance in the work of another Trinidadian writer of Indian ethnic origin, Shani Mootoo. Mootoo’s three fictional works, like Naipaul’s, deal with those who feel themselves to be outsiders at home and who come to see the migrant condition as the only viable alternative. The writing of these, and other, West Indian writers – almost always resident abroad – expand the horizons of literary history by acknowledging and critiquing a regrettable reality: that Caribbean societies create certain kinds of subjects who, by virtue of their unacceptable difference, are “made for export.”

Jamaica Kincaid: the right to criticize

Bawer notes that Naipaul, in his Nobel Prize speech, described his job as a writer: “to tell the truth about the world, however much that truth may confound ideology” (371-372). Jamaica Kincaid also seeks this elusive clarity, even if the picture of Caribbean colonial society that she draws is unflattering. Wheatcroft’s pithy phrase “Vidia Naipaul doesn’t do nice,” may equally apply to Kincaid. Indeed, her non-fictional writing shares Naipaul’s disgust for the complicity of her countrymen in what he repeatedly terms the worst consequences of slavery and colonialism: self contempt; the devaluation of the local in favour of blind mimicry of the imported; and the normalization of mediocrity and the picaresque at all levels. Jane King’s excellent, if caustic, analysis of Kincaid’s writing, acknowledges:

There is a conservatism about small places that is unnerving and the ... fear of stasis, which may or may not be stagnation. Stimulation is different to come by in such places and Kincaid the writer does well perhaps to fear that lack. It leads to a variety of manifestations and one is the lifestyle that killed her youngest brother - a relentless search for sexual stimulation to fill the void created by the lack of any other kind. (887-888)
King goes on to observe that those who leave, like Kincaid, tend subsequently to look back at their societies with concern if not disgust. “There may be many reasons which make a person prefer life in the metropole to life in a small island,” she continues, “but Kincaid’s attitude to the people of Antigua suggests that she believes that living in a small place coarsens both the understanding and the feelings” (890). Shades of Naipaul! Astutely, King questions why Naipaul was roundly attacked “for his supposed demeaning of things Caribbean” while Walcott, who mocks and repudiates political agendas held by West Indian critics, politicians or writers, is tolerated. Why? Because Walcott lived and worked in the region “and as a Caribbean person was deemed to have the right to comment [negatively] on Caribbean people” (891-892) while Naipaul forfeited that right by migrating. Yet Kincaid, who also left the Caribbean, seems to retain the right to criticize. Why? Like Naipaul, King demonstrates that in Kincaid’s “travel writing” she places “herself in a unique position able to understand the tourist and the Antiguan and despise both while identifying with neither” (895).

“The Antiguans are so corrupt and money-grubbing,” says Kincaid, “because that is what they learned from the corrupt and money-grubbing English colonizers. The English were terrible, but the Antiguans learned from them to be worse” (897). This is essentially the same point Naipaul makes about Trinidad in The Middle Passage. Yet Kincaid, in an interview with Frank Birbalsingh, attacks Naipaul for learning “to loathe where he came from, and to look at it in an untruthful way” (139). As Birbalsingh bravely responds, Kincaid’s A Small Place (1988) “seems to reproduce many of the insights of The Middle Passage which is still considered to be a destructive book.... in the sense that both ... describe a small country which had been despoiled by centuries of colonial exploitation, with the result that it’s left with a people who now exploit themselves” (140). Regardless of Kincaid’s assessment of Naipaul’s politics – for she reiterates her admiration for his craftsmanship – I would suggest that we may now have reached a “critical moment” where we can more dispassionately respond to writing that characterizes flaws in Caribbean social constructs. As the Bajan saying goes, “God don’t like ugly,” and neither do many West Indian readers and critics. In The Middle Passage, Naipaul criticized West Indian writers for subsuming their work to the reflection and flattery of “the prejudices of their race or colour groups” (64) and Donnell rightly points out that his general point has a long shelf life. That is, critical approbation tends to accrue to writing that portrays the heroic resistance and survival of oppressed groups and individuals, while there is some distaste for writing that demonstrates profound flaws, limitations and insecurities of groups and individuals. But maybe we need to look at ugly more
closely. I am suggesting that we may have now reached a critical moment where we can more dispassionately respond to texts that reveal flaws in our societies.

If, as Alison Donnell argues (232), “It is a general precept of post-colonial literary criticism that reading literature can bring us to an understanding of the conditions of being in such a way as to increase the possibility of positively reshaping those conditions,” then Kincaid and Mootoo’s work now, like Naipaul’s before, highlights issues that urgently demand our attention. Caryl Phillips asks, with King, “[w]hy somebody who lives so comfortably outside think she has the right to criticise those who have to live inside?” (145). He answers his own question; because “only somebody with her heart in Antigua could have written with such ferocity of purpose and self-revelatory hurt. Quite simply, she has the right to criticise because, irrespective of residence or nationality, she belongs”(146). While I would argue that exactly the same could be said of the early Naipaul, the wider point is that Caribbean critics can now ask such questions, can revisit notions of which authors have the right to offer such critiques, and why. This is a part, I propose, of Naipaul’s legacy.

Shani Mootoo: “novels of migritude”

Kincaid’s Lucy migrates in order to escape her mother’s internalized systems of patriarchal control. As Donnell explains, she needs “to be free from her mother’s low expectations for her future and high hopes for her sexual morality; free, that is, from the conventional scripting of Antiguan femininity” (197). Like Kincaid’s, Shani Mootoo’s work also constructs the West Indian home space as a place where traditional gender roles are still rigidly policed and transgression of ‘proper’ female sexual conduct results in dysfunctional generational and gender relations, and sometimes in horrific domestic and sexual violence. By contrast, the metropolitan centre seems a more positive location for the “freeing up” of alternative sexual subject positions. Certainly, Naipaul’s depiction of Indo-Caribbean women’s socialization into obedience and loyalty to caste and patriarchy at the cost of their own agency is pursued in Mootoo’s three fictions. And like Naipaul’s early work, Mootoo’s fictions vividly demonstrate the matter of fact employment of violence against women who transgress. In her latest novel, He Drown She in the Sea, the female protagonist who crosses the class boundary has to flee her island home to escape the murderous jealousy of her husband. In several of the stories in Out on Main Street, Indo-Trinidadian women are subservient and decorous, fearful of brutality or abandonment at the hands of their male partners: “you drive me to want to beat the shit out of you .... In his mind he can see the dark
purple, green and navy blue bruises on Tanya's shoulder blade. A curious satisfaction, pride of possession, comes over him when he watches them turn colour” (71).

Donnette Francis refers to the “unspeakability” of intimate violence committed against women which is finally being addressed by “third wave” Caribbean women’s writing; that is, the “transnational” works of authors like Edwidge Danticat, Patricia Powell, Elizabeth Nunez, Oonya Kempadoo and Shani Mootoo, all of whom have lived and written for extensive periods outside the Caribbean. Francis valorizes such texts as crucial interventions into the “hushed up” stories of Caribbean sexual subordination and abuse ‘at home,’ texts which openly challenge “sexual values in the region” and “reveal the violent inner workings of dominant sexual ideologies” (78). I want to suggest a connection between Naipaul’s construction of alienation and trauma at home and the possibility of fulfillment abroad, and several of Mootoo’s fictions which focus on those who are constructed as outsiders at home and who come to see the migrant condition as the only viable alternative. In this case the mark of “difference” is not the desire for artistic achievement, or for freedom from gender inequality, but the desire for same-sex love.

In *Cereus Blooms at Night*, the lesbian lovers have no option but to escape (once again) a jealous husband’s murderous rage and a society’s opprobrium, leaving the children behind to face a perverse punishment for their mother’s “difference.” And in several of the stories in *Out on Main Street*, “abroad” (in this case, Canada) is portrayed as far more homely because more tolerant of difference, less imbricated in powerful patriarchal and heterosexist norms. As Otoh’s mother explains to her trans-gender child in *Cereus*, “you don’t realize almost everybody in this place wish they could be somebody or something else?” (258). But the fulfillment of that desire is not permitted “in this place.” One is reminded of Naipaul’s remark in *The Middle Passage* about the fear of non-conformity in Trinidadian society, the need for everyone to “boil down” to a lowest common denominator. In *Cereus*, difference is punished and the collusion of the community in male abuse is forcibly highlighted: the serial rape of his daughter is referred to as the father having “mistaken Mala for his wife.” After all, Mala’s mother “had mistaken another woman for her husband” (197). The silencing of such perversion, the inability/failure to name it, and the link between the unnatural sexual behaviour of the father with that of the unnatural (lesbian) mother, implicitly indict the deeply conservative nature of Caribbean morality, of intolerant and repressive attitudes to sexual desire and sexual difference.

Reviewing *Cereus*, Jane Bryce notes that Mootoo’s text pushes back categories of gender and sexual orientation and attends to the
silenced stories of homosexuality in the West Indies. Significantly, it is writers like Mootoo who have left, who are based in North America or Europe, that dare to treat of such issues in their work. Faith Smith, in her preface to a special issue of Small Axe (“Genders and Sexualities”), observes that in both legal and popular discourse, male homosexuality is viewed as a transgression of the “moral fabric of society” which threatens “the image of the virile, straight, Caribbean man,” and is publicly denounced as an infection from without. Take a letter published in the local Barbadian press entitled “Take the high road on moral values” by Angelo Lascelles. The writer castigates talk “about decriminalising homosexuality (which is very nasty) and prostitution, to ruin our Constitution” given that “these two acts [sic], which are based on no morals whatsoever and which by The Bible are deemed as fornication, would be basically giving these two classes of people license to parade up and down our streets displaying what they do in their spare time.” Such folly sends the wrong message to future generations. “If God made man for man, he would not have made Adam and Eve” (10). The fear of, and hostility towards, expressions of female sexuality and male homosexuality are the common stuff of such male-authored letters.

In the 1960s, Naipaul (significantly, located outside of the region) highlighted the traumatic consequences of colonial alienation, self-contempt and mimicry. In the 1990s, Kincaid (significantly, located outside of the region) turned an equally angry eye on the traumatic consequences of internalized colonial patriarchy in the West Indies and its enforced policing of gender roles and sexual double standards. In the twenty first century, Mootoo (significantly, located outside of the region) exposes the “trauma, damage and loss that are caused by the denial of sexual self-determination and by the violent enforcement of female purity” (Donnell 208-9). We are talking here about real trauma. The kind of trauma reported on February 15, 2007 in the Jamaica Observer:

Three men branded as homosexuals were yesterday rescued by police from an angry mob outside a pharmacy in Tropical Plaza, where they had been holed up for almost an hour .... The approximately 2,000 people gathered outside the Kingston pharmacy hurled insults at the three men, with some calling for them to be killed ... the three men and the staff inside the pharmacy were visibly terrified as the mob demanded that they be sent out so they could administer their brand of justice ... The cops were forced to disperse the large mob by dispensing tear gas....

Jennifer Rahim, referring to the “discourse of [the] unspeakable”
in Caribbean writing underlines the mapping of the local space as one in which the particular kinds of sexual difference alluded to above cannot be accommodated: “Whether denial is expressed as physical violence, indifference, or polite deference, it seems that the terms of existence prescribed by the heterosexual status quo for same-sex oriented persons is mandatory invisibility. As Dionne Brand’s novel title, *In Another Place, Not Here* (2000) suggests, the quest of Caribbean lesbians for a place where their right to humanity and love is recognized, seems vain. At a West Indian literature conference held in Trinidad in 2006, Shani Mootoo attracted some hostile reactions when she admitted that for her, Trinidad could no longer be home: her sexual preference, and her self-constitution as a woman who refuses the traditional gender role, constructed her – in 2006 – as much of an outsider as Naipaul felt himself to be in the 1960s. Like him, Mootoo is created in the West Indies, but for export. Donnell calls for critics of Caribbean literature to address the inscription of diverse sexual identities in their theorizations of difference (181), referring to Mootoo’s texts as bringing to the fore the troubling consequences of the heterosexual imperatives which operate in the Caribbean. Indeed, she suggests that such writing of difference makes the case for a new kind of “social contract” through which sexual difference can be mapped onto the identity matrix of Caribbeanness (9). For her, texts like Mootoo’s – rather like Naipaul’s – have a “diagnostic” function: that is, the “airing of prejudices, traditions and social practices that disempower through the policing of rigid sexual and racialized identities (208). Ironically, given Naipaul’s distaste for homosexuality, Mootoo’s work reconfigures his legacy for the current generation.

**Postscript: Naipaul’s legacy - “Created in the West Indies”**

Why were we born under the star of rhyme  
Among a displaced people lost on islands...?  
Here we are architects with no tradition,  
Are hapless builders upon no foundation

I am not making any definitive statements here about developments in Caribbean literary scholarship, but attempting a model of Caribbean literary history that, as Adesanmi argues, seeks “connections between things” rather than emphasizing discontinuities and ruptures (230). I have pointed out the unapologetic exposure of the consequences of certain norms and expectations in West Indian society which marginalize difference and exceptionality, constructing such marginalized subjects as fit only for export, that forms part of Naipaul's
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legacy. But his influence can also be observed in the less controversial area of style.

Laurence Breiner, writing on Eric Roach, refers to “the dilemma of his generation” (33) outlined in the epigraph from Roach above: that is, the dilemma of staying at home and – usually – achieving little acclaim, or going abroad in order to get published, reach an audience and comconitantly be adjudged successful at home. As Bawer reflects, Naipaul (like Ralph Singh in The Mimic Men “is haunted by the question: What does a gifted, ambitious person from a place like Trinidad do with his life ... Is such a person fated to end his life in exile, a lonely émigré?” (374). Roach, Naipaul and other early West Indian writers felt they lacked local models and authorial traditions. Yet out of this “void” and out of the anguish and vain mimicry that constituted the colonial condition, out of a society that mocked the very profession of writer, Naipaul’s father Seepersad did produce and publish his stories. And the story of how he came to his writing is now a classic of West Indian literature, A House for Mr Biswas. After Seepersad, Sam Selvon’s The Lonely Londoners (1956) and Naipaul’s first three fictions (written and published within a year or two of Selvon’s) as well as A House for Mr Biswas and The Middle Passage, are notable for continuing with confidence and skill to incorporate the Trinidadian vernacular and to insert the marginal, “exotic” Indo-Caribbean subject into highly crafted literary genres like the short story, the comic novel, the bildungsroman, and the travel journal. Nothing was created in the West Indies?

Selvon’s use of the range of Trinidadian language varieties has been much remarked; Naipaul’s less so. Yet as Ervin Beck’s analysis of the story “B. Wordsworth” demonstrates, Naipaul’s use of form and language is quite revolutionary. This tale is “his first explicit handling of the problem of literary mimicry - that is, the colonized subject responding to the English literary canon thrust upon him by colonial education” (175). Yet the account of the would-be poets’ pathetic and derivative aping of this literary canon is rendered in non-standard Trinidadian vernacular and “indiginized ... by using a calypso-influenced, Trinidadian form” of narrative. Indeed, Beck notes that “snatches of lines from calypsoes appear in other stories in Miguel Street” and moreover, “each short story itself is calypso-like in being a gossipy, satiric sketch of a socially aberrant character” (176).

Naipaul’s legacy then, is evident in the deliberate care for language and form in the work of Caryl Phillips and Jamaica Kincaid. Both share the relish for the sound and meaning of words, a similar delight in terms impeccably placed and exactly used. Kincaid and Phillips are also, I would venture, masters of the irony and satire that have come to categorize Naipaul’s tone, and share with him a discerning eye for
incongruities of the postcolonial condition. And other successors have taken the experiment with form and language much, much further. Just to mention a few developments: they have utilized all the resources of the postcreole continuum, incorporated folklore and alternative epistemologies, disregarded genre boundaries and created mutant forms and fusions and – as we see in the work of Kincaid and Mootoo (along with fellow Trinidadians Laurence Scott and Robert Antoni) – appropriated elements of the magical and the gothic, decentred narrative voice and reinvented Caribbean geographies. I am sure they will continue to expand the horizons of West Indian literary production; but let us give Naipaul’s contribution its due.
In this paper, I focus on a connection between nomadic subjectivity and Derek Walcott’s poetic performance as the prodigal. In *The Prodigal*, Walcott’s disposition to figure critical/poetic thought as “elsewhere within here,” makes the twinned nature of the poet the very praxis of a creative imagination where horizons are plural and boundaries assume provisional, never finished shape. As Trinh T. Minh-ha explains it, “This is a dimension that one develops simultaneously, not something that happens linearly and successively in two time-phases, with one coming before the other” (“Inappropriate/d Artificiality” n.p.).\(^1\) In *The Prodigal*, Walcott writes about the practice of his craft as an odyssey through different landscapes illuminated by the interpenetration of opposite absolute worlds of art and home. I argue here that in *The Prodigal* Walcott frames complex issues of poetic practice, spatial mobility, and critical thought in his ironic use of Christian and Buddhist paradigms of the prodigal, and in the process deepens our understanding of the pervasiveness of Antillean tropes of errantry, nomadism, and diaspora in contemporary Caribbean literary culture.

Many of us are familiar with the parable of the Prodigal Son as it appears in Luke’s Gospel; it might begin something like this (*Gospel According to Luke*):\(^2\)

There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, “Father, give me my share of the estate.” So he divided his property between them. Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach
with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. When he came to his senses, he said, “How many of my father’s hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.”

The inappropriateness of the parable to Walcott’s persona is quite clear as the poem unfolds. The narrator in The Prodigal is aging, fatherless since infancy, and both his mother and his twin brother have passed away. Departures follow returns and opposite absolute worlds shadow each other:

I lived in two villages: Greenwich and Gros Ilet,
And loved both almost equally. One had the sea,
Gray morning light along the waking water,
The other a great river, and if they asked
What country I was from I’d say, “The light
Of that tree-lined sunrise down the Via Veneto.” (29)

This “Acknowleged prodigal” (60) returns to his home in St. Lucia with “the smell of cities in his clothes, / the steam and soot of trains of Fascist stations / and their resounding vaults …” (59). The sensibility described suggests that of the willing transnational for whom the distinct national boundaries of different homes are an acquired Otherness, performed for good measure. The persona travels lightly, unencumbered, not only from one village to another, but through many cultures, civilizations, and nations. One penalty of travel and domicile abroad is the fear of loss, of alienation: the “fear / that what he loved and knew once as a boy / would panic and forget him from the change / of character that the grunting swine could smell” (60). The poet’s sojourns abroad are bountiful in number and quality. His returns are unheralded by either the festive welcome of the parable’s grieving father or the jealousy of the parable’s good son, but joyous nonetheless in the renewal they offer the aging traveler and seeker:

The doors are open, the house breathes and I feel
A balm so heavy and a benediction
So weightless that the past is just blue air
And cobalt motion lanced with emerald
And sail-flecks and the dove’s continuous complaint
About repletion, its swollen note of gratitude—(68)

In lieu of a mother or brother, or neighbors or friends are the joyous
contemplation of the natural landscape and an unabated sense of original place.

The ironic playfulness that threads this poem is evident in the parodic replay of the swine imagery that Walcott initiates and George Lamming mocks in both *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953) and *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960). In Walcott’s *Epitaph of the Young* (1949) the persona compares the status of the black child with the image of a “brittle China shepherdess:” “You in the castle of your skin, I the swineherd” (6). In fact, Lamming misquotes Walcott twice at the end of *Pleasures*. First, he rewrites Walcott’s line to read, “You in the castle of your skin, I among the swineherd” (228), and then he substitutes “swine” for “swineherd” (228).3 Walcott revisits and replays the earlier exchange, incorporating the parable’s frame of reference in the process, with an ironic playfulness that runs counter to an inevitable sense of loss that comes with the infirmities of old age and the loss of loved ones in *The Prodigal*.

The narrator resurrects old issues of his dedication to art as a betrayal of his youthful vow to dedicate his life and art to his native landscape and people: “There was a vow I made, rigid apprentice, / to the horizontal sunrise, acolyte / to the shallows’ imprecations …” (94). In Walcott’s *The Prodigal* this betrayal is couched in personal terms; simply told, he outgrows the provincialism of youth’s ambition.4 As narrator explains:

... my craft’s irony was in betrayal,  
it widened reputation and shrank the archipelago  
to stepping stones, oceans to puddles, it made  
that vow provincial and predictable  
in the light of a silver drizzle, in say, Pescara. (95)

The tone-defining bitterness at having to choose between here and elsewhere is remarkably subdued if not absent: “And subtly the sense insinuates itself / that frequent exile turns into treachery” (6). His youthful vow, with the emphasis on his youth, as he tells it, is overwhelmed by a passion for art and a poetics of “untethered pilgrimage” (30): Yet, in *The Prodigal* the privilege of international reputation facilitates a transcendence of guilt. In its place are self-acceptance and the reassurance that home is recoverable. For example, the prodigal bemoans that “what was altered is something more profound / than geography, it was the self. It was vocabulary” (12). But the drought that follows on returning home is temporary:

The dialect of the scrub in the dry season  
Withers the flow of English. Things burn for days  
Without translation, with the heat
Of the scorched pastures and their skeletal cows.
Every noun is a stump with its roots showing,
And the creole language rushes like weeds
Until the entire island is overrun,
Then the rain begins to come in paragraphs
... (65)

The proliferation of weeds when the seasonal rains return is a measure of the naturalness with which the poet recovers the rhythms of island life and speech, thought and feeling.

Less well known than St. Luke’s is the Buddhist parable of the prodigal son. The Buddhist parable is part of the \textit{Lotus Sutra}, composed at the end of the second century AD (also called the \textit{Saddharmapundarika Sutra}), which revealed the new teaching of Mahayana Buddhism regarding the \textit{bodhisattva} beings.\textsuperscript{5} The Buddhist parable is longer and appears to have a different message. The rich man has only one son, and after his accidental return the prodigal has to prove himself over many years of instruction and tests designed by the father and unknown to the son, before he is publicly recognized, welcomed and rewarded by his father, then on his deathbed. The emphasis is not on sin and repentance, forgiveness and the restoration of a broken relationship, but spiritual growth, ultimately the achievement of nirvana. The ultimate stage of spiritual progress is abandonment of the singular individual quest for the nullity of \textit{shunya}, the voidness of all things.\textsuperscript{6}

Again, one recognizes the inappropriate(d)ness of the parable to Walcott’s \textit{The Prodigal} and also its usefulness in unraveling the ironies of Walcott’s framework. The taskmaster, one might argue, is what the narrator calls a “conspiring pen” (11); his dedication to craft in a cycle of departures and returns are a process of instruction and tests of devotion to craft and a community of artists beyond his native landscape and region. The void he confronts and accepts, one might argue, is the cycle of birth and death, inevitable anonymity, and even irrelevance in his native place. In this context, Walcott’s \textit{The Prodigal} is as much about spirituality and spiritual formation as it is a way of exploring the intellectual and cultural history of self and region: a process of translation that is also a process of transformation.

In \textit{The Prodigal} Walcott situates the ageing poet at home in New York, Boston, Milan, the Alps, Columbia, Mexico, as well as Trinidad and St. Lucia, wherever he happens to be. Travel, mental or physical, like the notion of exile is subsumed in the paradigm of the prodigal in whom opposite different worlds are blended, “And are both places blent? / Blent into this, whatever this thing is?” (79). The poem teases with its calculated homage to European artists, landscapes first encoun-
tered in art, and metropolitan centers of art, in full awareness of its history of imperial aggression and murderous exploitation. “Museums are the refuge of the prodigal” (93) is his facetious observation, as Walcott tries yet again to explain the meanings of errantry in *The Prodigal*:

I have been blent in the surface of the frescoes,
In the cracked halos, the tight, eternal gestures—
Admonishing finger, creaseless brow, in the folds
Of a sea-blue mantle, in hilltop turrets
And a resting fly. So, when I am dissolved,
what is that dissolution? My race, my sun? (92-93)

The narrative technique that Walcott employs here of absorption and perspective is in part the one that C.L.R. James employs so successfully in *Beyond a Boundary* to challenge any notion of mimicry in West Indian cricket. Differentiating between mimicry that repeats and mimicry that represents, the altered frames of reference in the representational positioning of the narrator, in the Prodigal’s case marginalizes history and its power as a model.

I am not made subtly Italian, there is no betrayal,
There is no contradiction in this surrender,
Nor heredity in delight in the knuckles of a Mantegna
Or abounding Botticellian locks, nor that housefly
In the corner of Crivelli; (93)

Spectatorhood is also a mechanism for discursive destabilization; it is a privileged position in Walcott as in C. L. R. James, and George Lamming, rather than a confession of neurosis. Rendered familiar through travel and the community of art and the imagination, Europe has lost its menace to the aging prodigal: “So, an adopted city slides into me / till my gestures echo those of its citizens” (88). But, again, this is not the whole story, Europe is not enough, nor is it the journey’s end: “This bedraggled backyard, this unfulfilled lot, / this little field of leaves, brittle and fallen, / of all the cities in the world, this is your center” (84).

In *Another Life*, Walcott names his sign: “My sign was Janus, / I saw with twin heads” (21.III). The Roman god Janus is figured with two faces: the god of beginnings, of the past, and the future, and of gates, doorways, and bridges. In the Caribbean, the sign of Janus is also figured as the Marassa, the Divine Twins; as Myra Deren explains it, “The concept of Marrassa contains, first, the notion of the segmentation of some original cosmic totality” (*Divine Horsemen* 38). The
Derek Walcott’s *The Prodigal*

Divine Twins, she writes, is “a celebration of man’s twinned nature: half matter, half metaphysical; half mortal, half-immortal, half-human, half-divine” (*Divine Horsemen* 38). Walcott’s *The Prodigal* renews this prior investment in the mystical values of twinning. There is his twin brother Roddy, now deceased; the two villages, Greenwich and Gros Ilet; and the ceaseless interpenetration of images from opposing different worlds:

The blank page grows a visionary wood.
A parallel section, no, in fact a whole province
Of far, of foreign, of self-translating leaves
Stands on the place where it has always stood
The right hand margin of the page …

..................................................

And my left hand another vegetation
But not their opposite or their enemy,
...

(62-63)

If anything, the poem progresses through self-acceptance and self-translation (86), and assumes the contours of harmony. Memories of conquest are suffused in charity that blesses all things; “History is healing, / and charity is its scar, its carapace” (37). This prodigal will not choose; “a spiritual lout” (8) perhaps, his anticipated point of rest is his own mortality, but until then, travel holds him in its thrall: “A twin-sailed shallop rounding Pigeon Island. / This line is my horizon. / I cannot be happier than this” (92). The prodigal I is an interesting phenomenon in a seeming disconnect from the fray of anti-imperialist and nationalist discourse. The isolated, ivory tower voice is certainly not the representative voice of Walcott over a lifetime; it is serene, benevolent, wise, instructive in its embrace of another life, unknown and yet to be explored.

Wherever and whatever Walcott happens to be at the time of writing, his poetic practice has been to imbue the experience of being there with experiences of elsewhere. Nomadic subjectivity in Walcott is about the simultaneity of complex and multi-layered identities. I am reminded that his praise of St.-John Perse in “The Muse of History” is a core value in his corpus as a whole, even in *The Prodigal*: What Perse glorifies is not veneration but the perennial freedom: his hero remains the wanderer, the man who moves through the ruins of great civilizations with all his worldly goods by caravan or pack mule, the poet carrying entire cultures in his head, bitter perhaps, but unencumbered. His are poems of massive or solitary migrations through the elements. (38). In Walcott’s case, this is poetic space in ideal terms; it is not the
veneration of homelessness but rather what Glissant styles errantry and totality, or "the ontological obsession with knowledge" (Glissant 19): “Since I am what I am, how was I made?” (70); or more facetiously, “Prodigal, what were your wanderings about? / The smoke of homecoming, the smoke of departure” (70).

Errantry, like nomadic becoming as Rosi Braidotti describes it, "is neither reproduction nor just imitation, but rather emphatic proximity, intensive interconnectedness" (Nomadic Subjects 5). Glissant makes a similar point in language specific to the defensiveness of the Caribbean poet and scholar for whom spatial mobility is life and art and critical thought. Errantry, therefore, does not proceed from renunciation nor from frustration regarding a supposedly deteriorated (deterritorialized) situation of origin; it is not a resolute act of rejection or an uncontrolled impulse of abandonment [...] prompting the knowledge that identity is no longer completely within the root but also in Relation. Because the thought of errantry is also the thought of what is relative, the thing relayed as well as the thing related. The thought of errantry is a poetics, which always infers that at some moment it is told. The tale of errantry is the tale of Relation. (18)

In this context, I am intrigued with Donna Haraway’s use of diffraction in the discourse of Relation or “elsewhere within here:” “Diffraction does not produce “the same” displaced, as reflection and refraction do. Diffraction is a mapping of interference, not of replication, reflection, or reproduction. A diffraction pattern does not map where differences appear, but rather maps where the effects of difference appear. ("The Promises of Others" 300.) Diffraction is also Glissant’s word of choice when he differentiates the Mediterranean from the Caribbean: “the Caribbean is, in contrast, a sea that explodes the scattered lands into an arc. A sea that diffracts”(33).

George Lamming throws interesting light on how the seemingly unmoored nomadic imagination centers itself in the simultaneity of time and place in his interview with David Scott; the issue is not betrayal, nor is it deracination:

... whatever location you have, the one thing I want to hold on to, is that acre of ground because you don’t decide that. That acre of ground is that Caribbean wherever I encounter it; it does not matter now whether I end myself in Asia, in Africa, or wherever, it is the window through which I am looking at wherever I am. It is that ground which will never be completed in my excavating of it. One holds that irrespective of wherever you want to locate me—that is your business, that is not mine. ("Sovereignty” 162)
Sovereignty is a better term than schizophrenia, the word that Walcott used to describe the writer’s creative use of the different cultures that nurture the Caribbean imagination in What the Twilight Says in 1970 (16). Certainly, Walcott’s use of schizophrenia as the idealization/dramatization of the colonial condition as a psychiatric disorder coincided with Fanon’s binaries in Black Skin, White Masks, which first appeared in English in 1968. Though schizophrenia may be an appropriate description of the crisis that Fanon’s binaries might engender, as Edward Baugh argues in “Walcott’s ‘Here’ and ‘Elsewhere’ and the Problematic of Identity,” it is an oversimplification that enshrines stasis and belies notions of identity as an ongoing process of being and becoming that belongs as much to the future as to the past (159). It may be that the enquiring self, whether cast as nomad, vagabond, crusader, errant, sailor, prodigal, emigrant, transnational, or whatever, does in fact represent subversion of a delimiting concept of the national sovereignty, and that is as true for Claude McKay as it is for James, Lamming, and Walcott. However, in Poetics of Relation, Glissant, like Lamming’s paradoxical The Pleasures of Exile, makes a case for the dual emergence of national consciousness and international consciousness:

The thought of errantry is not apolitical nor is it inconsistent with the will to identity, which is after all, nothing other than the search for a freedom within particular surroundings. If it is at variance with territorial intolerance, or the predatory effects of the unique root […], this is because in the poetics of Relation, one who is errant […] strives to know the totality of the world … (Poetics 20)

If anything, Walcott, like McKay, James, and Lamming before him, employs and mocks the subversive power of poetic lostness. Dubow argues that “thought does not merely follow on distance and dislocation as a convenient analogy or apt metaphor. It is distance and dislocation itself” (218). Thus boundaries in Walcott’s corpus take provisional, never finished shape; “love is as wide as the span of my open palm / for frontiers that read like one country, / one map of affection that closes around my pen” (66). There is always the horizon and the promise of new, unlimited vistas:

And always certainly, steadily, on the bright rim
Of the world, getting no nearer or nearer, the more
The bow’s wedge shuddered towards it, prodigal,
That line of light that shines from the other shore. (The Prodigal 105)
I would argue at this juncture that in the case of writers like Walcott, while spatial mobility might be read by some as evidence of the lingering conceptual apparatus of colonialism and the new imperialism, it is an apparatus that alters with each attempt to articulate a way out of old schemes of thought. In the prodigal’s words, “and what altered was something more profound / than geography, it was the self” (12); simply put, “We read, we travel, we become” (31). As Jessica Dubow concludes in “The Mobility of Thought,” spatial mobility is not merely the sociological condition of such thought; it is “the ennable precondition of its critique,” and indeed “the very project of such thought” (227). Thus The Prodigal eschews the bitterness of “the cracked heart and the dividing mind” and celebrates poetic practice as a limitless sphere “in the central mass and meaning of the world” (34-35).

NOTES
1 A cultivated “inappropriate(d)ness” is another way of describing it. The term is Trinh T. Minh-ha’s and she clarified its multiple meanings in an interview with Marina Grzinic:
   To relate this situation [inappropriate(d)ness] in which one is always slightly off, and yet not entirely outside, I’ve also used the term “elsewhere,” to which I’ve often added “within here”--an elsewhere within here. That is, while one is entirely involved with the now-and-here, one is also elsewhere, exceeding one’s limits even as one works intimately with them. This is a dimension that one develops simultaneously, not something that happens linearly and successively in two time-phases, with one coming before the other. (“Inappropriate/d Artificiality” n.p.)
4 See Antonia MacDonald Smythe, “The Privileges of Being Born in ... a Backward and Underdeveloped Society,” for a rich study of Walcott’s myriad subject positions in relation to provincialism.
5 In Tibetan Buddhism, a Bodhisattva is anyone who is motivated by compassion and seeks enlightenment not only for him/herself but also for everyone... Accessed February 11, 2007. http://kyky.essortment.com/whatisbodhisat_rflsh.html
6 “Doers of what is hard are the bodhisattvas, the great beings who have set out to win supreme enlightenment. They do not wish to attain their own private nirvana. On the contrary. They have surveyed the highly painful world of being, and yet, desirous to win supreme enlightenment, they do not tremble at birth and death. They have set out for the benefit of the world, for the ease of the world, out of pity for the world” (Oldmeadow 181).
7 In “The Muse of History” (1974), in an autobiographical aside, Walcott expressed a colonial’s fear of Europe: “I felt, I knew, that if I went to England I would never
become a poet, far more a West Indian, and that was the only thing I could see myself becoming, a West Indian poet” (63).

8 For a brilliant answer to the weight of colonialism and the struggle of the individual consciousness for recognition, see Walcott’s “Culture of Mimicry?” and of course CLR James' Beyond a Boundary. See also, Edward Baugh's analysis of the pitfalls of reading of Walcott's use of schizophrenia as a statement of intent in “Walcott’s ‘Here’ and ‘Elsewhere’ and the Problematic of Identity,” especially 157-159.


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Trinh T. Minh-ha. “Inappropriate/d Artificiality.” With Maria Grzinic. arch. ced.berkeley.edu/people/faculty/bourdier/trinh/TTMHInterviews002.htm Accessed 7/19/06


Chapter 10

Legitimate resistance: A survival story - the crisis of political ideology and the quest for resolution in some recent Jamaican novels

Kim Robinson-Walcott

This is my story
Real ghetto story
This is a survival story
True ghetto story
– Jamaican dancehall DJ Baby Cham (“Ghetto Story”)

Big up all de warrior from di present to di past
A nuff a dem a died fi a cause
– Jamaican dancehall DJ Elephant Man (“Warrior Cause”)

In the forty-five years since independence was granted in 1962, Jamaica, grappling with the socio-political legacies of colonialism, has struggled with different ideologies in its effort to forge a new national path. In the period immediately following independence, with its promises of record-breaking economic growth, the atmosphere was one of heady optimism – a feeling that the sky was the limit, that anything and everything could be achieved. That optimism translated, in the early seventies, to the widespread conviction that better could and would and must come in terms of addressing social inequalities. The spread of that optimism contracted as the decade progressed. However, ideology in one extreme form or another was at its height in that explosive period. The costs were dear: by the mid-seventies the lines of demarcation were drawn sharply, and the losses on both sides were severe. When the government fell from power at the end of that decade, despite the victory of capitalism over democratic socialism there was a new type of disenfranchisement – a disenfranchisement experienced
by former diehard political supporters on both sides, a disenfranchise-
ment of ideology. Since then, with the ever-growing disillusionment of
the majority of the population with politics and politicians, the failure
of touted miracle solutions such as structural adjustment, free markets
and globalization, compounded by the evident beginning decline of the
world’s current superpower, an ideological vacuum has been created.
So: a fall of optimism, a fall of idealism, a rise of materialism and cyni-
cism; and politicians and academics alike seem to be acknowledging
that there are more questions than answers in terms of resolving the
country’s problems. As social scientists argue among themselves as to
whether or not Jamaica qualifies as a failed state, the general popula-
tion is apathetic at best, hostile at worst, to the perceived shenanigans
of local politicians and indeed, world powers.

A number of novels by Jamaican writers have followed this
ideological trajectory from activism to apathy, from idealism to cyni-
cism. The hopelessness of the plight of the country’s urban poor was
famously described in Orlando Patterson’s classic *Children of Sisyphus*
(1964).1 Patterson’s depiction of the ‘poor and wretched’ inhabitants
of Dungle, echoing Fanon, is one of despair, but a noble despair: As
the Rasta griot Brother Solomon says, “Isn’t it strange, brother, how
wretchedness and despair can make gods of men?… Keep running. You
must keep running. The track is rough and round, but you must keep
running” (203).

A recognition of such hopelessness, in contrast to the ear-
lier post-independence optimism, led to an initial broad support of
the democratic socialism initiatives of the seventies. Such works as
Michelle Cliff’s *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987)2 reflect the searing so-
cial consciousness among the educated as well as the uneducated, the
overprivileged as well as the underprivileged, the revolutionary zeal
that erupted in that period and also a recognition of the violent conse-
quences of that eruption: in Jamaica there is “no telephone to heaven,
no voice to God. A waste to try. Cut off. No way of reaching out or
up. Maybe only one way. Not God’s way...” (16). “No miracles. None
of them knew miracles. They must turn the damn ting upside down.
Fight fire with fire. Burn...cyaan tu’n back now...I am about to kill one
of your creatures. Some of your children” (50).

Cliff’s novel expresses both the revolutionary fervour of the sev-
enties and the disillusionment with established seats of power that be-
gan to manifest in the early eighties, a feeling that one must take the
law into one’s own hands because the powers that be can or will not do
so. There is no telephone to heaven.

The wounds from the political war of that same period, as well
as the pain of disillusionment, are shown in more recent works such as
Lucayos

Brian Meeks’ *Paint the Town Red* (2003) or Garfield Ellis’ *For Nothing At All* (2005). As Norval (Nadi) Edwards has so eloquently stated, “*Paint the Town Red* is … testimony and haunting requiem, a tale which is ultimately driven by the imperative of remembering and recording the stories… of those Jamaicans caught up in the maelstrom of idealism, radical transformation, devastating political violence and deep social divisions, who dreamed, fought and died on the altars of lost causes, failed political gods and betrayed hopes.”

*For Nothing At All* similarly revisits the period of the seventies and the lives that were destroyed by the manipulations and manoeuvrings of politicians who seduced the young male residents of poor or working-class communities to be used as pawns in their turf wars. Their self-serving, power-seeking endeavours tore apart friendships as they tore apart communities, and as Ellis’s protagonist Wesley says,

> it is the why of it that bothers me, the way and the speed at which it came, this thing that made us so. It is as if we were halfway through a game of chevy chase… but before I can call my friends to come and play again, they are dead, I am in jail and our blood is on each other’s hands. It is the why of it that bothers me, for it does not make sense at all. It is hard to believe that we could have come to this. And I cannot explain or understand what has happened, or how and when. As if we have come and gone, and the game we started has not been finished, yet we have been wasted, vanquished and spent, for nothing…for nothing at all. (172)

> This is my story
> Real ghetto story

Dancehall always throbs with the pulse of the masses, and in Baby Cham’s song “Ghetto Story” (one of the most popular songs in Jamaica in 2006), the lyrics are haunting:

> I remember when we skip the poll clerks
> And dump the ballot box pan Tivoli outskirts
> And hold a plane ticket and go chill over Turks
> When me come back a still inna di hole me a lurk
> I remember those days when informer Dirks
> Get one inna him face and me nuh get no perks
> And de bigger heads dem are a couple of jerks
> Cause dem a mek di money, when a wi mash di works
Imani Tafari-Ama, in her contemporary study of an inner-city community in Kingston, suggests that the widespread psychosocial suffering of civilians can be attributed to the persistent neglect by successive governments, which have failed in their obligation to provide the inner-city communities with infrastructural resources and social support services to promote community development. ... [T]here is a pitiful paucity of political will... Neither is there any long-term policy initiative of poverty and violence eradication. The result is a truly vicious cycle for inner-city residents, who are damned to suffer and die without access to a piece of the political/economic pie, and equally damned to death by the often violent price they have to pay to get access to pie crumbs... No wonder we call their urban environment a ‘ghetto trap’. (227)

Yet: this is, as Baby Cham says, a survival story:

This is a survival story
True ghetto story...

Jamaica get screw, tru greed an glutton
Politics manipulate and press yutes button
But we rich now, so dem can tell man notin
Cuz a we a mek mama nyam fish an mutton

The post-seventies disillusionment with politicians, combined with a post-civil-war residual infrastructure of armaments and a post-civil-war culture of ruthlessness that were the legacies of those same politicians, led to a new dispensation, one which by the nineties had become manifest: the politicians no longer ‘ran things’, instead the dons did. Laurie Gunst in her study of the Jamaican posse underworld, Born Fi’ Dead, illustrates this reality when she relates that in the mid-1990s, the Tivoli gunmen were outdoing themselves with a recent spate of armed robbery and rape in Tivoli and in Rema, the ghetto nearby. Seaga [member of Parliament for the area, and former prime minister] said he had warned the criminals, but the dons had told him that since Seaga had not given them their guns, he could not tell them what to do. “The horse already gone through the gate,” said one unapologetic Tivolite. (244)
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The dons, often funded by drug running, provided for the communities, made “mama nyam fish and mutton”, protected the residents from rival gangs, from corrupt politicians, from corrupt police. In many inner-city communities the dons usurped the authority of the state.

\[ Wi \text{ get di ting dem} \\
\text{Dem outta luck now} \\
\text{Mi squeeze seven and di whole a dem a duck now} \\
\text{Wi have whole heap a extra clip cau we no bruk now} \\
\text{Rah rah rah rah [sound of gunfire]} \]

\[ Wi \text{ get di ting dem, so dem haffi rate we} \\
\text{Cau we a tek it to dem wicked of lately} \\
\text{And now the whole community a live greatly} \\
\text{Rah rah rah rah}^{11} \]

Dancehall DJ Elephant Man proclaims:

\[ \text{Big up all de warrior from di present to di past} \\
\text{An who know dem fight fi a cause} \\
\text{Big up all de warrior from di present to di past} \\
\text{A nuff a dem a died fi a cause}^{12} \]

However, the warriors that Elephant Man is “bigging up” are not the standard established historical figures of resistance such as, say, national heroes Sam Sharpe or Paul Bogle, but more recent figures such as Claudie Massop, Bucky Marshall, Jim Brown, George Flash, Andrew Phang – infamous ‘area leaders’ or dons who were eventually killed, many by the police in alleged shootouts. In contemporary Jamaica, for the residents of many inner-city communities abandoned by politicians, life would be as wretched and despairing for these children of Sisyphus were it not for these dons. These are the heroes. These are the sources of hope.

\[ Rah rah rah rah \]

\* 

This is the context, then, in which one must place Errol McDonald’s recently published novel *Legitimate Resistance* (2006),\textsuperscript{13} advertised by the publisher as “another street smart Jamaican novel”. McDonald paints the scene of contemporary Jamaica with much accuracy: poverty, senseless violence, corruption in the state. Gang warfare is rife in the inner-city communities of Kingston, with a new dimension – there is an influx of deportees (called ‘dips’) who are fighting
to wrest turf from the older established gangs; meanwhile the police respond by slaughtering innocents, and thereby alienating the inner-city residents. McDonald’s two heroes are Click, a don, and his chief assistant/second in command, the young ‘shotta’ Silver. Click is the head of the gang called the Ghost Riders (GRs for short), who at first seem merely to engage in the usual dark-side entrepreneurial activities of extortion, ganja running and literal elimination of the competition. However, McDonald rapidly establishes the GRs as “guardians of the people” (26), vigilante “deliverers of justice” (127) who in their demonstration of civic responsibility engage in “Robin-Hood style giveaways” (57) to their community. Extortion is well-intentioned: “Dem big company and big business haf to give us more money fi operate downtown. Wi a go use dat money to feed and protect the residents” (215). There would, McDonald suggests, be “mayhem” without them (111). “There was no escaping the killing fields of the Jamaican ghettos…Somebody had to stand up to point the guns in the right direction and destiny had chosen the Ghost Riders” (214). The dips, in contrast, are bad guys—though the status of true bad guys is reserved for the “police dogs” (214).

There was deep resentment and hatred for the police. They seemed to exercise a power drunk behaviour reminiscent of a colonial era where people in position overused their authority on their contemporaries and peers. Their many indiscretionary killings made them expect a backlash. A vicious cycle of fear and cowardice perpetuated the bloodshed. (143)

Silver, the warlord shotta, is described as a “freedom fighter”. As Click’s chief “enforcer” (65), he is the romantic young dashing hero, the “brave warrior” (200) who “bravely and fearlessly rode like lightening [sic]” (201).

In contrast, Click the elder (one is considered an elder if one makes it past the age of 30, as shown so disturbingly by Gunst in Born Fi’ Dead) is the “mastermind”, the “man of vision” (51) who brilliantly plans, strategises and executes the expansion of the GRs from mere inner-city gang to multinational corporate entity (reminding one of the rise to fame or infamy of real-life Jamaican drug don Vivian Blake,14 alleged head of the infamous transglobal Shower Posse).15 Click’s strategies, from establishment of a camp in the mountains (similar to the one in No Telephone to Heaven) to ganja shipment methods to terrorist tactics to money laundering to legitimization of operations, are carefully constructed, mapped out by the author in comprehensive and exhaustive detail, suggesting extensive research on the author’s part and prac-
tically providing any would-be aspirants with a template for success.

Click's vision is not based on greed. Click is a man with a mission, a man who knows he is destined to lead an uprising in Jamaica to save the people, a man clothed in righteousness and a protector of the people who is himself protected by Jah. As a righteous man he is reluctant to get involved in cocaine smuggling and distribution – and when pragmatic considerations change his mind (saving Jamaica is not an inexpensive endeavour), he insists that the cocaine must not be allowed to get into the hands of Jamaicans but must all be shipped out to other markets where the people matter less. Similarly his chief enforcer Silver is also protected by Jah – so long, as he tells a colleague earnestly, as he doesn't kill indiscriminately (88). No gratuitous violence here.16

Earnestness is an important factor. Because as one reads this novel one suspects that the author may be earnestly presenting the activities of the GRs as 'legitimate resistance'. There may be no irony in the title. There may be no irony in the book. McDonald's tone is at the very least matter of fact, if not downright admiring of the way that Click and his followers subvert the authority of the state (similar to the tone of Vivian Blake's son in his book). Any displays of ruthlessness on the part of the GRs, of which there are many, are presented as unfortunate but necessary aspects of running a successful business – one must retain control, one must let potential usurpers know who is in charge, one must exert a little discipline from time to time (rah rah rah rah). While it must be acknowledged that there are occasional moments when a voice of conventional morality slips in (for example, Silver's girlfriend fleetingly expresses reservations about her boyfriend's calling), these moments are quickly bypassed, sometimes seemingly quickly forgotten by the very character who uttered the words (like Silver's girlfriend), if not by the author himself – so much so that they read like the token intrusions of a concerned conservative editor.17

In an interview,18 the author confirmed this impression, acknowledging that the editor had found it difficult to accept that Click, given his activities of murder and extortion, could be a hero, much less a national one, and had reluctantly deleted sections in earlier drafts where he had compared Click to national heroes Paul Bogle and Marcus Garvey. (Big up all de warrior!) Nevertheless he asserted that “Click is a pragmatist, using what is available to him. He uses the tools at his disposal, uses the gun to liberate himself... Click is like Anansi, cunning...”

Certainly, the real-life drug don Vivian Blake seems to have been similarly cunning, judging from his son's admiring account of his subversive entrepreneurship.19 The trait of Anansi-like cunning is traditionally celebrated in Jamaican culture, as has been pointed out by
The counterculture outlaw figure, as discussed compellingly by Erin Mackie, has been romanticized and glamorized throughout Caribbean history, whether manifesting as seventeenth-century pirate, eighteenth-century Maroon, or twenty/twenty-first century ghetto cowboy-gunman or drug don. Mackie observes:

Early modern piracy has an analogue in late modern West Indian youth gangs... those celebrated as heroic discoverers and founders were engaged on an ethical frontier where the boundary between the law and the outlaw was prone to slip and slide in step with the sorry parade of institutionalized predation and exploitation. The pirate operates as a cultural repository for resonant historical memories of New World origins. The conditions of violence and exploitation that created what we now call the Caribbean continue to this day, generating modes of legitimacy and assimilation on the one hand and of transgression and resistance on the other, whose distinction from one another is, and has been since the days of pirates, confused by the complicity between the law and the outlaw. These conditions are embodied in the culturally mythic persona of the pirate whose ethical and aesthetic ambiguity becomes an iconic model for such justice-confounding and opportunity-bedeveling complicity. (29)

McDonald’s seeming admiration of Click’s Anansi-like cunning is part of a continuum of Jamaican – and wider Caribbean – admiration for heroes ranging from history’s Calico Jack to its Three-Finger Jack, from popular culture’s film version of aspiring cowboy Rhygin in The Harder They Come (also celebrated by Elephant Man in the song “Warrior Cause”) to its good-guy gangster Biggs in the movie Shottas. Yet there is, inevitably, ambivalence. The book Legitimate Resistance, McDonald says, “was meant to be a message to Jamaica: If you’re not careful, this can happen – the political vacuum can be filled; and if not filled by the right people, it could be filled by monsters. There are some monsters in the ghetto – it is another world uptown.” Did the author then view Click as a monster? “He is socially aware, he has to overturn the system by armed struggle.” Did the author view Click as a hero? “He uses the resources available to him.” Does the end justify the means? “Not when you’re approaching fifty. Maybe when you’re twenty-five, yes, you use violence to achieve peace.” The author emphasized that although he may have held some preconceived notions about the intended message of the book, it “took on a life of its own... The book has a personality of its own – it has its own identity, it has to come out
– like having a child.”

Click and his GR gang succeed in their legitimate resistance: the corrupt government is overthrown, the corrupt police are slaughtered or otherwise removed from duty, Jamaica becomes self-sufficient as a major exporter of ganja and other innovative agricultural products and so the economy booms, the Rastafarians are given Kings House as their headquarters and Haile Selassie’s grandson appropriately, installed there, and Click, Silver and the rest of the posse live happily ever after.

_Big up all de warrior from di present to di past_
_An who know dem fight fi a cause_

This is a survival story, a real ghetto story. It is a fairy tale story in many ways, of course – not least, the fact that the USA allows all of this to happen – but in many other ways it is real. “It’s the cold world,” McDonald said. “It’s not rosy like how I personally would like it to be, it’s how it is. I want it to jolt people, to let them look at the stark reality of it so they can prevent some of what is going on.” Indeed, the book is real in that it reflects many truths about Jamaica’s contemporary political and economic scene, though it may exaggerate them: the disillusionment with politicians, the view of the police as the enemy, the dependency of the urban poor on sources of sustenance and protection alternative to the state, the heavy reliance of the economy on income from the ganja trade, etc. These realities are not, needless to say, exclusive to Jamaica – the chilling occurrences in Sao Paolo in 2006, when a drug gang held the city to ransom for a few days seemingly for the sole purpose of showing who was boss, are but one dramatic testament to that fact, showing the sinister consequences of a counterposing of the inadequacies of the state with the adequacies of illegal alternative power bases in a globalized, telecommunicized world.

Perhaps more so, the book is real in that it speaks to the vacuum created by the loss of earlier political or economic ideologies and responds to the sense of hopelessness felt by many Jamaicans about the future of their country. It is real in that it echoes the ambivalence demonstrated historically by Jamaicans towards the outlaw figure of counterculture. It is real in that it reflects a celebration of violence, not gratuitous violence, not merely gangsterism, but violence as resistance in popular Jamaican culture. And it may be real in that it reflects what I fear may be a growing trend among Jamaicans to distance ourselves from, or excuse, or even justify, in other words legitimize, immorality on the grounds that it doesn’t affect us personally, or that we benefit from it, or that the end justifies the means.

And that I find disturbing.
Notes

1 H. Orlando Patterson, *The Children of Sisyphus* (Kingston: The Bolivar Press, 1971). All subsequent references will be to this edition.


4 Garfield Ellis, *For Nothing At All* (Oxford: Macmillan Caribbean, 2005). All subsequent references will be to this edition.


7 Ibid.


9 Baby Cham, “Ghetto Story”.


11 Baby Cham, “Ghetto Story”.


14 Blake’s journey from Tivoli Gardens small fry to transglobal empire mogul with multiple bases in the USA is described in loving and admiring detail by his son Duane Blake in the book *Shower Posse: The Most Notorious Jamaican Criminal Organization* (New York: Diamond Publishing, 2002). It should be noted that despite the title of the book, it is in fact not primarily an account of the Shower Posse but a biography of Vivian Blake – who, as his son goes to great pains to establish, distanced himself from the more heinous activities of the Shower Posse. Vivian, according to Duane, was an entrepreneur par excellence, but not a murderer.

15 It is noteworthy that author McDonald said in an interview with this writer (12 April 2007) that the idea for the book came about when he was living in Brooklyn, New York in the late 1980s – a time when the New York-based Shower Posse was at its height.

16 The real-life story of Vivian Blake again comes to mind here: Blake, according to his biographer son Duane, was always displeased by the violent excesses of the Shower Posse, particularly the mindless slaughter of innocent people – though the impression one gets is that Blake’s primary concern was the potential fallout – the potential disturbance to his business operations.

17 I was present at the book launch in December 2006 and the editor did seem concerned.

18 Errol McDonald, interview by author, 12 April 2007, Kingston.

19 Duane Blake, *Shower Posse*. 
20 Barry Chevannes, for example, has written extensively on the influence of the Anansi figure on folk consciousness. See, for example, his inaugural professorial lecture, *Ambiguity and the Search for knowledge: An Open-ended Adventure of Imagination*, University of the West Indies, Mona, 2001; also “What You Sow is What You Reap: Violence and the Construction of Male Identity in Jamaica”, *Current Issues in Comparative Education* 2 no. 1 (Nov 1999): 51-61.


22 This is not to suggest that the admiration of counterculture figures is primarily a Jamaican or Caribbean phenomenon – the immense popularity throughout the western world of the sexy vagabond Captain Sparrow in the movie series *Pirates of the Caribbean* or the cuddly/deadly Mafioso Tony Soprano in the television series *The Sopranos* are but two of innumerable possible examples to disprove this. Yet, as Erin Mackie, points out, the counterculture figure has peculiarly deep sociopolitical resonances within the Caribbean context, particularly among the dispossessed underclasses.

23 McDonald, interview.

24 Ibid.


**Works Cited**


The Caribbean and the vision of Caribbeanness are important for the study of trauma narratives because of the Caribbean’s unique position in colonial history and the legacy that history bequeathed on the islands. The Caribbean was the site of the extermination of the Amerindians, an important market for the slave trade, and the place of indenture for East Indians, among others. The history of this violence of extermination and subjugation has had a far-reaching impact not only on the Caribbean but also the world. The trauma of the Caribbean is also carried abroad by diaspora. Elizabeth Nunez and Erna Brodber both engage with the issue of individual and collective trauma caused by the diasporic Caribbean experience in order to create narratives that bring about a sense of recovery of a past lost and gesture towards psychic wholeness. In this paper, I will argue that Brodber’s *Louisiana* and Nunez’s *Beyond the Limbo Silence* engage with the trauma of colonial experience and seek to alleviate it and transcend it through the act of writing narratives that enact Edouard Glissant’s theory of Caribbeanness through different representations of the fugue as polyphony and flight. The individual traumas of both protagonists, Ella Townsend and Sara Edgehill, mirror the greater traumas of the African diaspora, particularly in its Caribbean variation, but their responses suggest two very different approaches to negotiating and working through the trauma.

My readings of Brodber’s *Louisiana* and Nunez’s *Beyond the Limbo Silence* as texts that respond to post-colonial and diasporic trauma are informed by Marlene NourbeSe Philip’s two definitions of fugue in her article, “Fugues, Fragments, and Fissures—A Work in Progress.” Philip first defines the fugue as a dissociative state in which an individual flees from the unbearable reality of his or her situation. The in-
individual acts in a dissociative manner, but internally maintains the illusion of being rational (Philip 25). Philip’s second definition refers to the fugue as a musical term. This original meaning of the fugue describes “a musical composition with polyphonic elements in which ‘themes are developed contrapuntally.’ Usually there is a melody or melodic phrase that is repeated in different keys and at different intervals” (Rudnicki qtd. in Philip 51). In this sense, Caribbean societies and Glissant’s vision of Caribbeanness as a mode of existing can also be considered a fugue, in that they celebrate diversity and not sameness.

Brodber’s text incorporates the second definition of the fugue as both form and function, presenting a diasporic spiritual community striving toward psychic wholeness and a re-membering of the lost voices of the past. Through *Louisiana*/Ella Townsend Kohl’s physical and spiritual journey, Brodber recovers a forgotten history of connection between the African diasporic communities in the Caribbean and the United States. In contrast, Nunez’s text represents the first definition of the fugue literally and spiritually through the flight of her protagonist Sara Edgehill to a women’s college in Wisconsin where she tries to hide from the legacy of colonialism, but finds herself face to face with North American racism. Ultimately, Sara’s flight does not link her to a larger body of black people; rather, it alienates her from both the Caribbean and the United States.

Despite the different approaches the texts take to addressing the traumatic experience of colonialism and diaspora, they share a gendered approach. Theories about nationalism, transnationalism, and even Caribbeanness and Creolité have traditionally been gendered male, whereas these texts seek to find a place and a voice for women within the diaspora. More so than being explicitly feminine, these texts write the story of the diaspora and the Caribbean from the perspective of the woman and through the relationships among women. While men are not excluded from these texts, and in fact play a very important role, their presence is mediated through the female consciousness.

**Point and Counterpoint: Telling and Retelling the Story of the Diaspora**

Erna Brodber’s *Louisiana* translates Edouard Glissant’s vision of Caribbeanness into a fictional text that defies national borders in favor of the productive nature of cross-cultural currents. As Glissant writes in *Caribbean Discourse*:

|Caribbeanness, an intellectual dream, lived at the same time in an unconscious way by our peoples, tears us free from the intolerable alternative of the need for nationalism and intro-|
roduces us to the cross-cultural process that modifies but does not undermine the latter. What is Caribbeanness in fact? A multiple series of relationships. We all feel it, we express it in all kinds of hidden or twisted ways, or we fiercely deny it. But we sense that this sea exists within us with its weight of now revealed islands. The Caribbean sea is not an American lake. It is the estuary of the Americas (Glissant 137).

Although Brodber’s text primarily takes place in the United States, it is in essence diasporic. Her tale of the psychic connection between Ella Townsend and the two sisters Sue Ann Grant King and Louise Grant both literally, in their migrations between and within the United States and the Caribbean, and figuratively, through their spirit possession, portray the cultural cross currents between the African descended people in the United States, the Caribbean, Africa, and Europe.

In the beginning section of the novel, “I heard the voice from Heaven say,” Brodber establishes the polyphony of the narrative by providing an oral history that follows no apparent logical or temporal order. Instead, the transcription functions according to the contrapuntal form of the fugue. In the transcription we can see that Ella is concerned with fulfilling her job as a writer for the WPA: “Mammy will give me nothing else to add to these white people’s history of the blacks of South West Louisiana” (Brodber 14). This disjointed narrative surprises not only the reader who has been prepared for an anthropological narrative, but Ella herself. Ella’s understanding of Mammy and her position as the interviewer are limited by the scope and preconceived notions she has of history and of the WPA project: “This woman they say has important data to give; is important data; she has seen many things; had done things; her story was crucial to the history of the struggle of the lower class negro” (Brodber 21). Ella is trying to figure out Mammy’s history in order to incorporate it as a footnote to capital-H history. Yet, she also seems to realize that this history is more complex when heard from the voice of the people. The contrapuntal narrative from the sisters’ perspective in the novel instead focuses on finding an adequate “horse,” who will ride (Brodber 17). The “venerable sisters,” as Ella comes to call them, are interviewing Ella, although she does not realize it. Mammy King asks about Ella’s origins and on finding out she is from the islands, proceeds to ask her if she knows about “high science,” “pukkumina,” and “getting the power” (Brodber 20). Mammy is testing Ella to see if she will be receptive to an alternative form of history and of knowing. Lowly and Mammy’s version of history differs from that of the WPA in that it demands its own standards and forms in the telling. This is not to be the “history of the Blacks of South West Louisiana,” rather the story of the African diaspora coming together in time and
space. The official History seeks to compartmentalize and fragment the diasporic experience in order to make it fit with its dialectical conception of history, but through the transcription it is evident that Mammy and Lowly resist that reading and demand their own.

Throughout the transcript there are multiple references to hair braiding and the affective ties that simple action builds between women, which is a repeating trope that genders the text and alludes to the way in which the connections among the diaspora are made. Hair is a racial marker as well as a gender signifier, and both Mammy and Lowly notice that Ella has perfectly pressed hair, which indicates her conformity to a white standard of beauty. Mammy, on the contrary, has braided hair. The act of hair braiding unites the women through its tenderness and intimacy. Ella’s dream connects the act of hair braiding with her grandmother’s love and care, although she does not yet realize that it was her grandmother who did the braiding. In the transcription, Lowly recounts a recurring dream that Ella has about her past in Jamaica. Although she is not yet conscious of the origins of the dream, Ella experiences a sense of security in the memory of drifting off to sleep while her grandmother braids her hair. However, Ella fears the dream because it is always accompanied by a feeling of falling that stems from her grandmother’s death, and the subsequent absence of her security. The hair braiding also foreshadows that the connections made in this text will be an organic, twisting together of disparate strands of history into one internally differentiated meta-narrative.

The following two sections of the novel “First the goat must be killed” and “Out of Eden” describe and relate Ella’s process of absorbing the Caribbeanness, or hybridizing force of the sisters. As Kezia Page writes, “Louisiana posits a unique kind of border theory. Through Brodber’s concept of diaspora she advances a fluid, borderless space extending beyond the Caribbean to the African diaspora” (60). In fact, Brodber’s border theory can almost be said to have no borders. The forced poetics of Louisiana create a chorus of voices, a multi-part fugue that sings the unrecognized history of the people. Lowly and Mammy’s version of history differs from that of the WPA in that it demands its own standards and forms in the telling. This is not to be the “history of the Blacks of South West Louisiana,” but the story of the African diaspora coming together in time and space.

This borderless fugue is not a running from, but a coming to, consciousness. Ella becomes the embodiment of the two sisters, a third space where African-descended people throughout the diaspora come together. Ella describes her position when she takes on a new name and begins wearing the diamond-shaped pendant given to her by Reuben:

I am the link between the shores washed by the Caribbean
sea...I join the world of the living with the world of the spirits. I join the past and the present...I am Louisiana...Still I am Mrs. Ella Kohl, married to a half-caste Congolese reared in Antwerp. (Brodber 125).

In some ways, Ella is a feminine counterpart to Paul Gilroy’s conception of the Black Atlantic as her journey expresses “a desire to transcend both the structures of the nation-state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity” (Gilroy 19).

The specificity of the modern political and cultural formation I want to call the black Atlantic can be defined, on one level, through this desire to transcend both the structures of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity...They have always sat uneasily alongside the strategic choices forced on black movements and individuals embedded in national political cultures and nation states in America, the Caribbean, and Europe (Gilroy 19).

Although metamorphosed into Louisiana, Ella initially finds herself bound by cultural and class assumptions, as well as her own past, which hinder her donning of the psychic mantle. When Ella first begins to realize her transformation, she resists the people’s explanation that she has taken on the spirit of Mammy King on the basis that she cannot be a “hoodoo woman.” To her, the folk religion of the people is nonsense, although she feels the effects of Mammy’s spirit within her consciousness. Reuben chides her with the words of her discipline, “How unfortunate when we realize that we are nothing more than the people!” (Brodber 41). Ella’s resistance comes from the borders that she has internalized from her parents, who had high expectations for her. Ella’s parents are Jamaicans who emigrated to New York City. Both work menial jobs; yet, they see themselves as better than the blacks in the United States. Ella’s choice of career in anthropology already marginalizes her in their eyes, and she knows that buying fully into the Afro-spiritism of the sisters will completely alienate her from her parents and disappoint their hopes. Ultimately, Ella does alienate herself from her family, denying a reification of the borders her family connections represent for the community of the diaspora, which cannot be limited by class: “Like Brodber, Ella and Reuben’s politics is their lifestyle” (Roberts 91). Ella and Reuben choose to live among the folk rather than the middle class and accept the thought structures of the folk as their way of understanding and operating in the world.

Glissant also appeals to the folk in his discussion of the Creole folktale. The Creole folktale serves as a symptom and a marker of the forced poetics of the Creole language. The Creole folktale re-presents
the problem of the Creole demotic, which arose in response and opposition to the imposition of the French language. The language and the folktale “manifest both an inability to liberate oneself totally and an insistence on attempting to do so” (Glissant 128). Madame Marie’s re-telling of the Anancy folktale incorporates the Caribbean folktale in a way that figures not only the forced poetics of the Caribbean, but also the forced poetics of the novel and of the project of cross-cultural understanding within the African diaspora. Anancy’s magic kettle can figure as the root of culture that feeds the people through a spontaneous eruption when called upon by the people. Anancy’s kettle stops working when cleaned. In the same way, cross-cultural relations become strained when they are placed inorganically into aseptic categories. It is also a process that occurs in secret, beyond the prying eyes of the neighbors. In this way, Brodber’s text almost solely focuses on the lives and relationships between African descended peoples. Her text is not largely concerned with the relationship between blacks and whites: “Louisiana was part of my larger interest in Africa and diaspora, and the need for blacks of the diaspora, and to a certain extent of Africa, to know each other and to understand that you have to get through it together, for political purposes if nothing else” (Brodber interview with Abrahams 30). The forced poetics of Louisiana instead creates a chorus of voices, a multi-part fugue that sings the unrecognized history of the people.

Due to its form, Louisiana demands much more from its readers than an average novel and encourages an active readership through its gradual and elliptical mode of divulging information. As June Roberts notes: “Each character sketch, so informed by glimpses of fragmentary history that subverts narrative desire, compels this reader to pay attention to Brodber’s recuperations of social history instead of merely relaxing with a good novel” (89). To truly understand the narrative of Louisiana, the reader must be prepared to delve into the archives as the novel draws almost all of its force for healing and connection from the past. Ella’s powers are limited to sharing the past, and by this, her clients are able to remake their future: “I am a soothsayer, yes, but one who looks behind, sees and will see the past” (Brodber 106). It is in the nature of Caribbeanness to look to the past rather than the present, and most certainly not to predict the future. Caribbeanness provides a way to contextualize the past and move beyond the wounds into a more integrated mode of living. At least, this is how it appears when read from the perspective of Ella’s practice, which she learns from Madame Marie, “get them to solve the large problem by focusing on the small” (Brodber 77). One of the most extensive stories Ella records is that of Ben, the sailor who was once a teacher in Louisiana, St. Mary, Jamaica.
His story seems to embody and repeat the legacy of colonial violence in the Caribbean. Ben's repressed narrative haunts his days. He impregnated one of his students and she died when having an abortion. The story repeats the legacy of colonialism because of Ben's place of power in relation to the child. Lilieth's story would have remained untold if it had not been for Ella. In a similar way, once the story of the dead of the African diaspora is told and remembered, perhaps the living can move on to spiritual and social equanimity.

Brodber's choice of New Orleans as the primary setting for this novel also engages all of those populations. One of the benefits of setting the novel in a port town is the fluctuation of people and ideas from many parts of the globe. Although the ship may be the metaphor for the Black Atlantic, in Louisiana, it is the port town. Ella's identification with the port town as well as with the sea is significant for her position as a woman and the gendered position of the novel. During Mardi Gras, Ella remarks, “I never left the stoep but it was great. Perhaps I’ll be on the road next year. No. That’s Reuben’s domain” (Brodber 107). Throughout the novel, Ella continually makes a distinction between her position within the home and Reuben’s on the street. The stoep and the port are all metaphors for the border, but also for the security and stability of dry land. The historical repository stays with women because of their deeper connection to the land and to their children through whom they pass on both the trauma and the recovery. Although Ella has no biological children in the novel, the manuscript of her experience as a medium serves as her legacy. While in St. Mary’s, Reuben immerses himself with the people, while Ella stays at home, tending to the housekeeping, but also the recording machine. Ella realizes that “it was this process that finally led me to opening the recording machine gently and reverently as if I was cleaning my baby daughter’s private region” (Brodber 50). The explicit reference to her daughter’s genitalia makes a clear link that the fruit from the machine will be Ella’s offspring. As she assumes the role of scribe and interpreter of the sisters and Reuben continues learning about the people, Ella notes that, “The cross was back on the circle” (Brodber 50). She is referring to the cross on the woman’s symbol ♂️, which she felt had been removed when she confronts St. Mary’s society for the first time after Mammy’s death.

The objective of Brodber’s narrative, as counterpoint to that of the WPA, suggests a new way of uncovering and recording history that can be translated and utilized by the reader. As Glissant states, “The literary activity that is part of such a collective consciousness in search of itself is not only the glorification of community but also a reflection on (and a concern with) the specific question of expression” (104). Ella's method of historiography can be translated to the modern individual,
even if he or she is not gifted with a second sight. Ella's clairvoyance is applicable in that all are surrounded by rumors and whispers of the past. Mammy and Lowly do not give her a straightforward, chronological narrative, but Ella uses the bits and pieces to spark searches in the library; nonetheless, Ella continues to learn more from living members of the diaspora such as her sailors that tell her their story.

Ella's, and presumably Brodber's, method of oral history collection and research also suggest an ethics. When Ella breaks through the spiritual wall and remembers her past in Jamaica, her first response is to travel to New York and confront her parents. She then reconsiders: "What was the use? Could I get any more truth about the situation from her than I already had. Confronting her only meant that I wanted to destabilize her. I could only morally do that if I was willing to devote time to helping her reassemble herself" (Brodber 92). Engaging with the official history is not to be taken lightly; rather it is a serious activity that requires careful attention to the possible fallout. Yet, this is not to say that the burden of psychic reconstitution falls to the oral historian. After her revelations to Ben, Ella states that she has done her job and that "He had to take it from there" (Brodber 105). While these statements may seem contradictory, they are really two sides of the same coin. As Glissant states, "Western thought has led us to believe that a work must always put itself constantly at our disposal...It can happen that a text is not written for someone, but to dismantle the complex mechanism of frustration and the infinite forms of oppression" (107).

The historian can become too involved in the story, supplanting the individual's perspective on the narrative, in effect dispossessing the person to whom the story pertains. This is something that Brodber most definitely wants to avoid. To do so would in effect stifle the diversity of experiences and reactions that such research seeks to promote.

This approach to historical research that tells a repeating and varying story can also be seen in the way that Ella and Madame Marie share and recount stories and songs with their men. Songs serve as the bridge connecting cultures and individuals. Madame Marie and Ella collect songs from the men, and the sharing of songs incites the telling of memory. The songs are intimately tied to experience, as Glissant states, “This music progressively records the history of the community, its confrontation with reality, the gaps into which it inserts itself, the walls which it too often comes up against” (110). *Louisiana* narrativizes Glissant's observation by making music the final step through which Ella ‘gets over.’ On hearing the song “Sammy Dead,” Ella reconnects with her forgotten Jamaican past and comes into her full psychic powers.

Brodber's novel exemplifies the musical fugue in literary form in order to surmount what Glissant terms “The main difficulty facing
national literatures today” (100). Through her interwoven narratives of Mammy King, Lowly, Silas, Reuben, Ella, and a host of others, Brodber combines “mythification and demystification, [a] primal innocence with a learned craftiness” (Glissant 100). Brodber achieves this retelling of history in *Louisiana* in the service of a transnational identity, rather than a fixed Jamaican or African American identity. The long awaited revelation of Mammy King as a Garveyite, and founder of UNIA units in Louisiana is important for Brodber’s project because Garveyism and the UNIA, as grassroots movements, mobilized and incorporated the people. In his study of the Caribbean presence in the United States, Winston James finds that “Although the leadership of the UNIA was disproportionately Caribbean in origin...The overwhelming majority of the UNIA’s membership in America was Afro-American. Indeed, almost 60 percent of its branches (with Louisiana leading the nation with 75) were located in the South (135). Brodber’s text illuminates this forgotten history while troping on the idea of History itself.

**Fugue as Flight: Beyond the Limbo Silence**

Elizabeth Nunez’s *Beyond the Limbo Silence* also responds to the experience of postcolonial trauma, but not in the same way as *Louisiana*. If *Louisiana* defies the border in favor of cross-cultural currents, then *Beyond the Limbo Silence* fixates on the border and the uncertain space it occupies in both the individual’s and society’s consciousness as a place of departure. Sara Edgehill, the protagonist, exists within the limbo silence by her position as a woman, a post-colonial subject, and ultimately, as an immigrant to the United States. The work of Nunez’s text explores the conditions that cause Sara’s uncertain silence and attempts to move her beyond silence to voice and action. Nunez presents Sara’s rise in political consciousness as a *bildungsroman* that begins in Trinidad, but only comes to fruition through her experience in Wisconsin, and most importantly, through her relationships with Sam and Courtney. Despite its inclusion of voices from past and present, the novel, as a *bildungsroman*, privileges the voice of the protagonist, Sara Edgehill.

Her maturation can be interpreted as a series of fugues, or flights from the traumatic reality of her experience; paradoxically, through these flights, Sara gains an awareness of the nature of postcolonial trauma and the way her personal trauma links with that of black America. As Sara states at the end of part one, “My journey to that realization would be a long one. It would begin with my resistance, my longing to see the world as I wanted it to be, my reluctance to accept that I could not separate myself from what was taking place in American in
1963...and would link me irreversibly to black America” (Nunez 120). Examining Sara’s resistance illuminates some of the difficulties in the pan-African project of connection proposed by *Louisiana*. In Trinidad, the majority of Sara’s trauma stems not from her own experience of colonialism, but from its effects on her parents and family members.

As Laurie Vickroy notes in *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*, “Transference of traumatic responses can continue for generations. Family relationships and the children of survivors are deeply affected by their parent’s experience ...Moreover, children inherit patterns of traumatic response” (19). As a child, Sara has witnessed her parents’ forced poetics in the face of personal trauma and American hegemonic oppression. She accepts the scholarship to the women’s college in Wisconsin in order to escape the memories of her father’s submission to the Americans and her mother’s infertility. Sara’s actions mirror those of the individual in a fugue state: “The fugue state can, therefore, be seen as a way of protecting the mind and the psyche from overwhelming trauma and allows the individual to live ‘normally;’ it is a state of amnesia, often associated with wandering, and ‘can be literal or figurative’ (Rudinicki qtd. in Philips “Fugues” 25). In a sense, Sara sees herself as a martyr for her family’s psychic equilibrium. This feeling is evident in the way that Sara describes her hairstyle: “My hair, at the time, was always plaited into two thick ropes crossed over each other on the top of my head like a crown of thorns” (Nunez 134). Like the images of braids and braiding in *Louisiana*, the plaits signal her links to her mother and her race, but they also mark a difference. This image of Sara’s hair is juxtaposed with that of her mother’s, which is soft and light and conforms to a white standard of beauty. Sara’s trauma, as inherited from her mother, emerges from the standard of beauty set by her mother’s “flawless butterscotch brown skin, her soft curves, her lustrous, wavy hair,” and from the fact that she is an only child (Nunez 34). All of her mother’s expectations for a “girl child” rest with her, and she feels that she is a miserable failure. By fleeing to the North, Sara feels that she can give her mother something to brag about to her friends. The motif of hair, rather than being a unifying force as in *Louisiana*, becomes a marker of racial difference and shame in *Beyond the Limbo Silence*.

Sara flees to Oshkosh, Wisconsin, a new space where she can become a different person. As a middle-class woman, Sara implicitly believes stability comes from a college education and an acceptable marriage. Frantz Fanon states that a normal black child, upon the slightest contact with the white world, will automatically become abnormal. In Sara’s case, the contact with whiteness occurs in her own family. Her grandmother is very fair skinned and considered “mannish” by Sara’s
friends and neighbors. This mannishness derives not only from her large build and tough attitude, but from her color: “She was the color of the English, the colonizers who controlled our island” (Nunez 5). Her grandmother’s mother is English and is rumored to have gone mad from listening to the sounds of calypso and from falling in love with an obeah man. Her father fears “back-sliding” from the position he has fought to assume as part of the respectable middle class by Sara’s lapses into the Creole demotic and her volatile emotional state. Her fugue to the North also represents a respite for her family, as she says, “No, like my mother, my father needed me to be out of his sight. I reminded him of the one thing he wanted to deny” (Nunez 75). Thus, Sara’s fugue is not only personal, but social as well.

The difficult road Sara must travel in order to see herself as a part of black America derives in part from her class status in Trinidad and her father’s repudiation of anything that links them to the lower class. Due to her education, Sara is very aware of and sensitive to class distinctions, such as speech and religious affiliation. When she first comes home from her new school, she mimics the speech patterns of Ena, the maid, saying, “Ena say dat dis school harder dan de odder school I was in” (Nunez 173). Her father nearly runs the car off the road and forces her to repeat the words with a proper English accent. His lesson does not go to waste, because when Sara sees Courtney burning roots in her room, she notices that Courtney’s accent is thicker, once the roots are burned, the accent Sara “knew returned—middle class, educated” (Nunez 119). Like language, obeah is considered the province of the lower class and a mark of a deficient education. In Louisiana, Ella’s work as an anthropologist allows her a more fluid transition to the world of the folk, but Sara cannot get beyond her class expectations and tap into the regenerative power of the folk. When she cuts class to go to hear Eric Williams at Woodford Square, she is again reminded of the class distinctions among the people as her teacher says, “How’d you like the daughter of your mother’s maid sitting next to you in class” (Nunez 173). Sara’s colonial education has also been a classed education, but perhaps to say so is a redundancy.

Sara also connects the African-Americans fighting for civil rights to the lower classes. When she goes to sing at the Knights of Columbus, she realizes that her immigrant status makes her different from American blacks, a recipient of special treatment. When the conversation at the dinner turns to issues of race in the South, Mrs. Weaver, Molly’s mother, differentiates Sara from the American black population. Sara accepts this separation, “She waved them away and when she spoke again of how intelligent I was, how cultured, and when the ladies remarked again about my accent—very British—I, too, allowed
them to separate me from those burning and looting Negroes” (Nunez 174). The issue of speech again comes up and Sara finds herself exaggerating the Britishness of her accent in order to please, and to differentiate herself from the American blacks. Sara finds security in her difference and discomfort around blacks of the lower class. She even breathes a sigh of relief with the other passengers on the bus when they emerge from the black ghetto in Milwaukee. The white population of Oshkosh, with the exception of the O’Briens, seems to feel that the violence in Mississippi is the fault of the blacks who are not being patient with the white Southerners. At the Knights of Columbus dinner, the knights and their wives seem to imply that if only American negroes were more like Caribbean negroes, they would soon get their rights. Although Sara feels some discomfort with these statements, she nonetheless applies them in her own way. While at the college, she initially gravitates toward Angela whose optimistic attitude seems to ingratiate her with the white girls of Wisconsin. Angela seems happy and assimilated and Sara wants to become like her, instead of Courtney. In light of her childhood in Trinidad, Angela represents hope, while Courtney merely offers her more of the same confusion in the mixture of Western culture and African traditions: “I chose the light. I chose Angela. I would be my guide” (Nunez 63). Sara wants Sameness, not Diversity.

She finds personal validation in her relationship with Sam Maxwell, a law student from Milwaukee. Like Reuben and Ella, Nunez poses the relationship between Sam and Sara as ripe for political action. However, that possibility is derailed by what Sam perceives as the incommensurability of their experiences. Sam’s critique of Sara’s political position is based both on gender and geography. He feels that she cannot understand him or the history of his people because she comes from the happy islands of calypso. This becomes a recurring trope between them. Sam misunderstands the Caribbean experience and Sara does not know how to explain it to him, partially because she does not yet know how to explain it to herself. She seems to be caught in the limbo silence as her experience constantly recurs in flashbacks as she compares it to his. Sara begins to come to a political consciousness through her relationship with Sam. He urges her to see herself as implicated in the American struggle for civil rights. Yet, Sara distances herself from the violence of the civil rights movement by turning Sam’s words into a movie that she could have seen in Trinidad. Sara translates the images of violence that she hears from Sam into a medium that routinely showcases such violence for entertainment purposes, the cinema:

After Sam had told us all, after he had drained us dry with the horrors of Birmingham, we sat there silent, in a daze,
until Mrs. O’Brien reminded us of desert. Then the screen in my mind went black again. The sunlight streamed in... The movie had ended. It was not real. Nothing Sam had said was real. There was nothing to remind me of a black family stoned out of Oshkosh, four little girls crushed...two little boys bleeding to death. (Nunez 137)

Sara is slow to recognize the gravity of the civil rights struggle in the United States, as Sam becomes increasingly radicalized by the politics of Malcolm X. Sam’s focus becomes increasingly narrow as the violence in Mississippi escalates, and he can no longer conceive of Sara as part of his nationalist project. Sara finds herself reproducing Sam’s mistaken ideas about the Caribbean in her attempts to keep him. She remarks that a squirrel in the Caribbean would not have to live with winter on the mind because there is always food available. As a metaphor, it is inaccurate. The Caribbean is not a paradise for its workers. Just as the white girls at the college see Sara and her home as primitive, Sam sees it as a relative paradise. He cannot envision her as part of his world, and he does not see the importance of linking her struggle to his. As Courtney tells her, “American black men are not the same as West Indian men...American black men think they know all about suffering and it’s made them hard” (Nunez 190). He cannot see her as his equal in suffering, and does not respect her opinions or attempt to understand her past experiences. Ultimately, Sam cannot be translated to the Caribbean experience, especially after his time in Mississippi when he has experienced the full brunt of Southern racism.

Yet, Sara’s “irrevocable link” to black America is her pregnancy. Not only is she bearing an African American child, but her awareness of her pregnancy coincides with the kidnapping and subsequent murder of Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman. Over the course of the summer in Oshkosh, Sara cannot continue to find refuge in her cinematic fugue. The images Sam gives her on the phone are reinforced by the television. The physical threat is real, because Sam, whom she knows and loves, could potentially be a victim of Southern racism. But above all, her own body is threatened by her pregnancy. Having a child out of wedlock would shatter her parents’ middle class hopes for her. As Angela says, “Girls like us don’t do things like that back home” (Nunez 224). Her ultimate connection with the Negro body politic occurs as the newscaster announces the finding of two “Negro bodies” (Nunez 249). Sara is horrified and the threat of racial violence finally hits home: “A piece of Mississippi slipped through a crack in my heart and touched me directly. What if they were talking about my Negro body?” (Nunez 250). The adjective Negro carries with it the weight of the black body and the weight of history.
In *Beyond the Limbo Silence*, Nunez’s protagonist is given few options for political participation. In part, Sara is stunted through her status as an immigrant. She does not belong to the land. When she attempts political action by giving up her scholarship, she is thwarted. Her only other option, once Sam departs for Mississippi is to turn to Courtney and to obeah. When she becomes pregnant, Courtney presents the abortion as a method of political action. Aborting her child in favor of the cause—to free Sam from responsibility (and herself from shame)—links her to the tradition of the slave women who sacrificed their children rather than permit them to be slaves, and those that jumped off of the ships during the middle passage. For Nunez, the abortion serves as a bridge that makes Sara take the leap into obeah and thereby her African heritage. For Sara, obeah comes to symbolize blackness, and her fear of the obeah is her fear of the African blood running through her veins. She thought that she had feared Bertha’s madness, but she comes to reinterpret her great-grandmother’s madness as love for the obeah man. Her fear of Bertha dissipates as she comes to recognize it not as madness, but as a different form of existing. Through the ritual abortion, Nunez tries to create a spiritual linkage between the Caribbean and the United States. As Courtney tells Sara, “The spirits connect you and me, and Sam, and Mississippi and all black people in America” (258). But her words seem a bit forced, especially as the relationships between all of the black characters in the novel disintegrate.

Ultimately, Sara claims to come to terms with her African ancestry and learns not to fear the darkness within her. Will this change her course of political action? The novel seems to point in that direction. Sister Agnes comes to Sara with a variety of options that will allow her to continue at the college but remain true to her convictions. In addition, one can imagine that Sara will now reread her experiences of Woodford Square and the implications of her great-grandmother’s forbidden love. The novel seems to suggest that relations between African Americans and Afro-Caribbeans are not possible in this moment in time, if ever. The incommensurability of the experience is a greater barrier than the legal barrier between Ella and Reuben. The only recourse Sara has is to reinterpret her own context in a way that reinforces the separations even as it acknowledges linkages.

Nevertheless, the power of obeah to create a New World identity for Sara is also suspect because of her reaction to the last ritual that she and Courtney perform together. During the ceremony, Sara is called Yoruba and channels the spirit of her aborted child, but unlike Courtney, Sara cannot control herself during the ceremony or even respond as she should. When Courtney urges her to let go of the hen she
resists her thinking: “I did not want to go back. I did not want to return to my body” (Nunez 311). Sara wants to flee from her body; a return to the body signals a return to a reality she cannot face, the horror of racism and her loss of Sam. In the fugue state “the individual forgets his or her earlier life and adopts a different identity. Trauma is often the precipitating factor and the new personality is not recognizable as having any link with the earlier one” (Rudinicki qtd. in Philip 25). Although Sara has identified her body as part of a larger body, that of blacks in the Americas, she is still an individual, and as such is now in flight from the trauma of having had an abortion. No real community is built among black people in Beyond the Limbo Silence. The relationship between Sam and Sara ends, and Courtney goes home to St. Lucia.

Nunez’s novel reinforces the very real presence of boundaries in the reintegration of an African diasporic community. Borders can be transcended, but pose a very real obstacle to the creation of community. Such community requires a transgression of boundaries through alternate ways of knowing, such as the arts and the spiritual as in Louisiana and Beyond the Limbo Silence. The intellectual dream of Caribbeanness must be conceived around the structures and divisions of the state, which is why these texts are so provocative. The challenge lies in translating the spiritual communities created in Louisiana and Beyond the Limbo Silence into living communities engaged in the recovery of forgotten stories embedded in the past. The difficulty of creating such a community cannot be glossed over. Even in Brodber’s narrative, national boundaries play a large role in the political action allowed to the characters. Reuben Kohl is also an immigrant and his place in the United States needs to be secured through his marriage to Ella. Prior to their marriage, Reuben, much like Sara, must keep a low profile in his diasporic activism. Unlike Anancy’s kettle, the melting pot of North America and the Caribbean is more stringently regulated as the material and intellectual resources produced by each country are finite. As Glissant writes, the language of the folk tale “manifest[s] both an inability to liberate oneself totally and an insistence on attempting to do so” (Glissant 128). Brodber and Nunez’s narratives attest to this fact in the struggles of their protagonists, but the authors’ attempts to articulate a way of understanding diasporic consciousness beyond the confines of the nation points to an unflagging desire for unity.

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RITES OF SPRING

Arriving in mid-afternoon
and waiting for check-in time,
I find the Nassau hotel’s pool area
infested with American kids on spring break…
From behind glass in the adjacent dining room
I observe as the frothy tequila concoction
they consume (as though life depended upon it)
gradually raises the volume of their youthful voices:
their gestures grow more emphatic, their faces
flushed... the way they touch each other
becomes less circumspect and more urgent,
like desperate love – as the blender mug
full of their happiness arrives yet again
through the doorway of an adjacent ground-floor room...

Perhaps it’s an important post-adolescent rite
that I should not be witnessing...That night
the noise invades our hotel rooms as they sing,
sounding now like drunken sports fanatics
yelling for their side’s – or any side’s – victory.
In the wee hours they abandon all inhibitions, leaping
into the pool, pulling off each other’s clothes, insisting
that all get naked – like truth, perhaps, like their gifts
of time and youth, like the already-fading memory
of a heart that can feel, without the erasure
of drunkenness, all the wild wonder of the world...
The scene from my balcony, four floors above reminds me of a Titian painting (I can’t recall the name) where young people, much like these cavort in a rustic setting, with Bacchus sprawled senseless somewhere in the background, and a tipsy toddler, lifting his chemise, pisses delightedly into the stream of wine (I was suddenly gripped by the thought of these revelers giving new meaning to ‘the wee hours’, and resolved to give the pool a miss this trip)...

In the surrounding hotel rooms serious conference delegates (like me) tossed in their fragile sleep, mumbling profanities at the kids and their infernal noise. But aren’t we here too for our own rite of spring? Our dull academic papers purchasing a few days of conviviality: the delirium of a brief escape from the routine. It’s only that, with the help of careful language and other learned refinements we manage our excesses more discreetly... and mutter disapproval at these kids while we long, perhaps, for the licence they take for granted in their drunken rite of spring.

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March, 2007
Lucayos

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